THE COMMITTEE OF
ETERNAL DELIBERATION

Institutional satire from inside the university

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The Committee of Eternal Deliberation: Institutional satire from inside the university

Bryn Williams-Jones

Summary

No institution sets out to become absurd. The university's rituals of deliberation, documentation, and review are built from genuine ethical concerns: fairness, accountability, transparency, and trust. But when responsibility is endlessly deferred, when judgment is replaced by compliance, and when integrity is performed rather than exercised, deliberation becomes a way of avoiding rather than enabling decisions.

The Committee of Eternal Deliberation is not a call to abandon process, nor a plea for heroic individualism. It is a reminder that institutions are moral actors, not just procedural ones, and that rules cannot substitute indefinitely for responsibility. The committee will continue to meet. The forms will multiply. The question is whether anyone, eventually, will decide.

Purpose and scope

Universities are full of intelligent, well-meaning people committed to fairness, integrity, and transparency. Yet decisions are routinely delayed, displaced, or dissolved into procedures, committees, rubrics, platforms, and rituals that seem designed to prevent rather than support judgment.

This document adopts the form of an institutional report to examine how good intentions turn into process — and how process can become an end in itself. Through satire and exaggeration, it traces recurring patterns in academic governance, bureaucracy, and leadership without proposing a comprehensive program of reform.

Intended audience

This document is intended for readers familiar with academic institutions, including faculty members, administrators, professional staff, students, and anyone who has participated in meetings where the outcome was additional meetings.

No prior expertise is required. Prior exposure to institutional processes may be unavoidable.

Document status

This document reflects current institutional practices at the time of writing. Examples are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Interpretations may vary depending on committee membership, mandate, and quorum.

Further clarification may be provided pending review.

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Author's Note on Process
In writing this book, I used generative AI as a writing assistant and in-house editor — engaging in extended, iterative exchanges to test structures, clarify arguments, refine prose, and think through the overall architecture of the manuscript. These conversations were grounded in extensive notes, drafts, and lived professional experience. The tool did not generate the ideas in this book; it assisted in sharpening, framing, and organizing them. Every argument, interpretation, structural decision, and final formulation was reviewed, revised, and approved by me. I assume full responsibility for the content.

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Prologue

This book grew out of a longer writing project in which I have been trying to make sense of academic life from the inside. Through *BrynStorming*, a bilingual space for thinking in public, I have written reflexive and narrative pieces about bioethics, leadership, and the everyday work of universities. Over time, that practice has also made increasing room for sarcasm and satire — not as stylistic flourishes, but as ways of noticing things that are otherwise difficult to name.

Sarcasm and satire do different kinds of work. Sarcasm is local and pointed, a way of expressing frustration, fatigue, and disbelief. It is often the language of those who know a system well enough to see its contradictions up close, and who are running out of patience for polite descriptions that smooth over these contradictions. Sarcasm tends to surface when the gap between official discourse and lived experience becomes too wide to ignore.

Satire operates at a different level. It is less interested in individual moments than in recurring patterns — in the rituals, procedures, and performances through which institutions present themselves as rational, ethical, and necessary. Satire is not a retreat from seriousness; it is a method for confronting and critiquing the absurd. Some institutional practices are difficult to describe directly without reproducing their own logic: the solemnity, the moral inflation, the procedural density that shield them from scrutiny. Satire makes those practices visible by refusing to grant them the reverence they demand.

At its best, satire works not by cruelty but by exposure, bringing into view the institutional inertia and path-dependency that allow certain systems, roles, or procedures to persist long after their original justifications have faded. It shows that these arrangements are sustained less by necessity than by habit, performance, and deference. By rendering them slightly ridiculous, satire reduces the distance between those who govern and those who are governed, and in doing so can return a sense of power to those who have come to doubt that institutional responsibility and accountability are even possible.

Academic institutions are particularly fertile ground for this kind of work. Universities are full of intelligent, well-meaning people committed to fairness, integrity, and careful deliberation. They are also densely bureaucratic organisations, reliant on committees, policies, platforms, rubrics, and procedures to manage risk, distribute responsibility, and signal legitimacy. Many of these mechanisms are defensible in principle. Over time, however, they can acquire a life of their own, displacing judgment rather than supporting it, and multiplying deliberation without bringing decisions any closer.

This book uses both sarcasm and satire to explore those dynamics. Some chapters stay close to lived experience, giving voice to the irritation and absurdity that accompany everyday encounters with academic bureaucracy. Others step back and allow institutional logics to speak for themselves, by adopting the forms, language, and rhythms through which universities usually communicate authority. The goal is not to mock individuals, but to make visible the systems in which they are embedded — systems that often mean well, but that have become strangely adept at avoiding responsibility while documenting it extensively.

What follows adopts the form of an institutional report. Not because universities lack such documents, but because they produce them fluently. This form allows the patterns under examination to unfold with minimal commentary. The committee will deliberate. Procedures will be followed. Integrity will be affirmed. Decisions may remain pending.

Incident Report: Saturday Morning

On the morning of May 6, 2023, the Coronation of King Charles III was being broadcast as part of the regular news cycle. The spectacle appeared as a strikingly ostentatious display of wealth, and as an anachronism with little place in contemporary democratic societies. In sharp contrast to the gold- and jewel-encrusted objects — apparently retrieved from storage for this sole purpose — and the richly adorned social elite in attendance, the news ticker scrolling beneath the ceremony reported on devastating flooding in Charlevoix and the Outaouais; forest fires in Alberta and British Columbia that had, once again, displaced members of First Nations communities (a painful legacy of colonial history); and the ongoing war in Ukraine.

The juxtaposition of these images and stories highlighted stark — and deeply depressing — inequalities. The costumes alone worn during the Coronation likely represented millions in accumulated wealth, resources that could have supported thousands had they been directed toward public need rather than ceremonial self-aggrandizement. The King himself appeared neither regal nor inspiring; instead, he seemed old, tired, and vaguely lost amid the glittering artefacts, glamorous attendees, and interminable religious rites. What this spectacle evoked most immediately was the satirical logic of *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life*, and two sketches in particular.

In *The Miracle of Birth*, a woman is giving birth, yet the attention of the attending physicians is devoted entirely to ensuring the presence of sufficiently impressive technological equipment — a mechanical flimflam designed to impress an Administrator during a surprise visit — while the patient herself fades into the background. Similarly, the excess of the Coronation rituals recalled *Growth and Learning*, a biting critique of religious practices that are hollowed of substance and rendered both disempowering and mind-numbing by their own solemnity.

At this point, analytic distance gave way to something closer to absurd recognition. The spectacle no longer invited critique so much as incredulity. This shift — from moral outrage to laughter — marked the moment when satire emerged as the only response capable of capturing the dissonance on display. In ongoing exchanges that morning, this descent into silliness prompted reflection on the peculiar power of satire to speak truth to power.

The work of Monty Python was revolutionary in conservative 1960s Britain and remains relevant today. In contemporary Quebec, a comparable role is played by Infoman and its host, Jean-René Dufort. Their treatment of perennial Montréal construction projects, the everyday absurdities of municipal politics, and the pomposity of national and international leaders illustrates how satire punctures inflated authority by rendering it ridiculous. One can easily imagine a future *Monarchie express*, complete with sports-commentary-style reviews of royal ceremony (following earlier segments such as *Canonisation express*).

Satire also plays a serious epistemic role within academic practice. A frequently cited example is the 2018 article published in the British Medical Journal, "Parachute use to prevent death and major trauma when jumping from aircraft: randomized controlled trial," which offers a devastating critique of unreflective devotion to randomized controlled trials. In this spirit, students and colleagues in bioethics have been encouraged to experiment with satirical writing, particularly within venues such as the *Art, Culture & Creative Work* section of the Canadian Journal of Bioethics.

The effectiveness of satire — whether in Monty Python, Infoman, or academic parody — lies in its capacity to expose people, roles, and practices as other than what they claim to be. By

doing so, satire strips them of unearned authority and credibility. It reduces distance: from elite to citizen, from untouchable to accountable. When executed through silliness rather than cruelty, satire becomes widely accessible, even as it remains difficult to endure for those subjected to ridicule. It is relatively easy for those in power to dismiss reasoned critique offered by an opposition. It is far more difficult to respond to satire that exposes, with elegance and economy, the simple fact that the Emperor has no clothes.

1. The Ivory Tower Cinematic Universe

Not Hogwarts, Jurassic Park, or the Avengers, but sometimes feels like all three

Author's note
This chapter uses popular representations of academia in film and television as a contrast device, juxtaposing cultural myths with institutional realities. The aim is not to critique popular culture itself, but to show how these narratives obscure the complexity, labour, and structural constraints of academic work.

. . .

Pop culture loves academia, but mostly as a backdrop for eccentric geniuses, dusty libraries, and dramatic monologues about "truth." Movies and TV have given us professors who fight Nazis, teach magic, or save the world between lectures. They wear tweed, quote Latin, and somehow have infinite sabbaticals. Meanwhile, the rest of us are busy trying to find a free room with a functioning projector.

We're asked if we "just read books all day" and "have four months of summer vacation," which is adorable and 97% incorrect. These portrayals are fun, but they've also given us a set of myths that cling surprisingly hard.

The result? A cultural script that says academia is one thing: a single, noble path for brilliant minds who live for ideas; and more often than not, they're male minds. The reality is messier — and far more gender balanced. Academia is not Hogwarts, not a Marvel origin story, and certainly not a guaranteed tenure track for anyone who "follows their passion." If it were, I'd have an enchanted office chair, an invisible scribe to handle the paperwork and make the mountains of email vanish, and maybe a plot arc that didn't involve budget cuts.

Instead, academia should be understood as a sprawling ecosystem of roles, politics, and contradictions — more multiverse than monoculture. Some of those roles are thrilling; others involve spreadsheets that appear to have been designed by a vengeful minor god.

So let's unpack these myths and archetypes one by one. Think of it as a cross between film criticism and professional therapy. We'll invite pop culture's favourite professors to the party, laugh at their quirks, and then look at what academic life actually involves. Spoiler: fewer whips, less wand-waving, no time machines, and absolutely no Avengers-style heroics — just more committee meetings and surprisingly complex spreadsheets. And unlike in the movies, no one ever warns you about the email volume. No one.

Myth #1: Academia is a single career path

Pop culture gives us exactly one template: **The Professor™** — omniscient, eccentric, and allergic to calendars. The distracted genius in a tweed jacket with elbow patches, glasses perched halfway down the nose, living on coffee and cryptic wisdom. In fiction, you get to pick your flavour:

- **Indiana Jones** (*Indiana Jones films*) — Professor by day, whip-cracking archaeologist (and occasional grave robber) by night. He spends more time outrunning boulders than grading papers, yet somehow keeps his job.
- **Professor McGonagall** (*Harry Potter series*) — The unflinching teacher-administrator hybrid who runs an entire magical institution with nothing but discipline, moral clarity, and sheer force of will. She's essentially the provost, dean, HR, and the emergency response unit rolled into one.

- **Rupert Giles** (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) — The underpaid librarian-professor who quietly holds the universe together while teenagers save the world. He's the embodiment of "other duties as assigned," which in his case includes demon research and apocalypse prevention.
- **The Library Hermit** — A character archetype in every campus film: the scholar allegedly polishing the same manuscript since the 1970s.

These characters are wildly inconsistent — which is perfect, because so is academia.

Reality: Academia is a constellation of roles

Some academics teach, some do research, and many do both. Some run programs, shape policy, lead departments, manage crises, build partnerships, run labs, translate research for public audiences, raise millions in grants, design curricula, or advise governments. Some work inside universities; a large and growing number work outside them. There is no single path. There never was.

Myth #2: If you're smart and hardworking, you'll succeed

Pop culture loves the idea that brilliance and effort guarantee success. Just work harder, think smarter, and the universe will reward you. Right? Sure — if your universe is scripted by Marvel.

- **Tony Stark** (*Iron Man*): Genius billionaire playboy philanthropist. Builds an arc reactor in a cave and saves the world. Academia talks meritocracy, but reality hands you grant rejections and shared offices, not Stark Industries perks. Spoiler: no one's handing out arc reactors at faculty orientation.
- **Hermione Granger** (*Harry Potter*) — Works harder than anyone, memorises every spell, still gets sidelined by plot armour. In academia, brilliance often loses to politics, timing, and who sits on the hiring committee. Tenure isn't earned with perfect homework; it's negotiated in rooms full of Excel tables, politics, and politely hostile emails.
- **Spock** (*Star Trek*) — Logic incarnate, yet constantly overruled by captains who "go with their gut." Academia has its own version: evidence-based proposals ignored for "strategic priorities." Live long and prosper, but only if your grant aligns with the dean's pet project.
- **Ender Wiggin** (*Ender's Game*) — Brilliant strategist, saves humanity at 12. Academia's version? You still need tenure letters and a robust CV. No one cares how many alien fleets you've crushed if your student evaluations are mediocre and your grant applications all went down in flames. And unlike Ender, you can't blow up the enemy fleet and call it "knowledge mobilization."

Reality: Talent and effort help, but so do timing, privilege, and luck

Academia likes to think of itself as a meritocracy. And yes, being smart and hardworking is essential. But it's not enough. Structural inequalities, historical exclusions, and systemic biases shape who gets ahead. The right passport, mentor, or institutional affiliation can open doors, or quietly close them. Unlike Tony Stark, alias Iron Man, you can't invent your own funding agency.

Hard work matters, but so does the invisible scaffolding that shapes who gets to climb.

Myth #3: You just need to follow your passion

Movies sell passion as a golden ticket. Follow your dream, and everything falls into place. In academia, passion is necessary, but if unmanaged, it's a one-way ticket to burnout.

- **Anakin Skywalker** (*Star Wars*) — Passion for justice turns into galactic HR nightmare. Academia's dark side = toxic work cultures disguised as "rigour." Spoiler: no lightsaber duel will fix your workload.
- **Neo** (*The Matrix*) — Follows curiosity, ends up dodging bullets. In academia, bullets = Reviewer #2. There is no spoon, and no mercy in peer review.
- **Frodo Baggins** (*Lord of the Rings*) — Passion for the quest, but nearly dies. Academia's Mount Doom = the promotion committee. You'll need a Sam, not just a dream.

Reality: Passion is necessary but insufficient

Passion fuels the long hours and helps you to absorb the rejections, do the revisions. But passion alone can't sustain you. You need boundaries, strategy, and the occasional escape pod. Otherwise, you're just Anakin — brilliant, burned out, and wondering where it all went wrong. Passion can light the way, but it can also run the fuel tank dry if you don't protect it.

Myth #4: Academia is about ideas

Pop culture loves the lone genius scribbling equations on glass walls. Reality loves paperwork.

- **Dr Emmett Brown** (*Back to the Future*) — Brilliant ideas, but also endless tinkering and chaos. Academia adds ethics certificates and budget spreadsheets. Great Scott! Your time machine needs a risk assessment.
- **Rey** (*Star Wars*) — Big ideas about destiny, but reality = scavenging for parts. Replace "parts" with "funding." Your Jedi training won't help with grant portals.
- **Bruce Banner** (*Avengers*) — Ideas matter until bureaucracy sends you to anger management workshops. Hulk smash? More like Hulk submit expense reports. Even the most brilliant idea needs to survive institutional review, budget forecasts, and at least two committees whose purpose no one fully remembers.
- **Tony Stark** (*Avengers Endgame*) — Saves the universe with one brilliant idea, but only after endless prototypes. Academia adds 12 reviewers and a six-month ethics approval delay.

Reality: Academia is also about systems, structures, and survival

Yes, ideas matter. But so do grant applications, committee work, accreditation cycles, internal audits, and the annual performance report everyone forgets about until the night before. You'll need to publish, apply for funding, supervise students, and translate your work into something legible to peer-reviewers. It's not just about thinking. It's about doing, managing, and adapting while resisting the urge to Hulk-smash your inbox.

Myth #5: There's one right way to be an academic

Pop culture says professors = classroom + research. Reality says otherwise.

- **Professor X** (*X-Men*) — Runs a school, leads a team, saves the world. Unrealistic HR expectations, but great metaphor for multitasking. Try doing that with a 3-3 teaching load.
- **Yoda** (*Star Wars*) — Teacher, philosopher, warrior. Academia loves specialists, not Jedi generalists. "Do or do not" doesn't work on grant applications.

- **Dr. Strange** (*Marvel*) — From neurosurgery to sorcery. Career pivots happen, though usually less magical. No one gets tenure for mastering the mystic arts, unless they now include strategic planning.
- **Gandalf** (*Lord of the Rings*) — Mentor, strategist, occasional fireworks expert. Academia rarely rewards polymaths, unless you can also chair committees.

Reality: There are many ways to contribute and many ways to succeed

Some academics teach. Others research. Some run programs, shape policy, or work outside universities entirely. The academic world looks less like a ladder and more like a multiverse — different timelines, wildly inconsistent continuity. There's no single blueprint here, only a shifting mosaic of ways to contribute, succeed, and occasionally reinvent yourself.

Myth #6: If you get a PhD, you'll get a job in academia

Movies make credentials look magical. Reality makes them look… negotiable.

- **Professor Ellie Sattler** (*Jurassic Park*) — Paleobotanist, ends up running from velociraptors. Fieldwork is real; dinosaurs less so. Your biggest predator is the job market. And unlike Ellie, your biggest chase scene will be refreshing the HR jobs page.
- **Professor Ian Malcolm** (*Jurassic Park*) — Chaos theory expert, spends most of his time screaming. Academia has its own chaos: hiring committees. Life finds a way; hiring committees, not always.
- **Dr Ellie Arroway** (*Contact*) — Astrophysicist, discovers extraterrestrial life, and still has to justify her research funding. Academia prepares you for many things; political committees are never one of them.
- **Dr Egon Spengler** (*Ghostbusters*) — Brilliant scientist, and chronic collector of spores, molds, and fungus. Academia has fewer proton packs, but roughly the same ratio of poorly understood equipment.

Reality: A PhD is a beginning, not a guarantee

Completing a PhD is a major achievement but it's not a ticket to a tenure-track job. The academic job market is competitive, unpredictable, and often opaque. Many PhDs end up in contract positions, in administration or in roles outside academia altogether. That's not failure. It's adaptation. Your PhD opens doors, but not all of them lead to ivory towers. Careers branch, stall, pivot, and occasionally detour — and that's normal, not a sign of failure.

Myth #7: Academics work alone

Pop culture loves the lone genius trope. Reality loves teams.

- **Avengers** — Collaboration saves the universe. Academia too, minus the cool costumes. Assemble your co-authors (ideally ones who answer emails).
- **Fellowship of the Ring** (*Lord of the Rings*) — No one destroys the One Ring solo. Same for tenure dossiers. You'll need allies for the journey.
- **Starfleet crews** (*Star Trek*) — Science as a team sport. Academia pretends it's solo, but reality = collective effort. Even the captain doesn't publish alone.
- **Guardians of the Galaxy** — Misfits save the galaxy together. Academia also thrives on odd collaborations, sometimes with people you'd never pick for your lab.

Reality: No one does this alone. Community is essential

Behind every successful academic is a network: mentors, colleagues, students, friends. Academia can be isolating, especially early on, but it doesn't have to be. Build your fellowship — even Frodo needed Sam, and Gandalf's guidance.

Conclusion: Beyond the myths

Pop culture myths about academia are fun, but they're also misleading. They promise adventure, certainty, and prestige. Reality offers complexity, diversity, and occasional absurdity — the kind you can't fix with a whip, a wand, or a conveniently timed sabbatical. It's a messy, fascinating multiverse where ideas matter, but so do people, systems, and survival strategies like knowing which committee actually has power. And that's good news. Because once you ditch the myths, you can build a career that fits you — not Indiana Jones, not Professor McGonagall, not Tony Stark. Just you, navigating the chaos with curiosity, resilience, and maybe a little sarcasm.

If popular culture offers a romanticised version of academic life, institutional documents provide a different kind of fiction. The following materials reflect how universities describe themselves when no one is watching.

Excerpt from the Policy on Procedural Alignment

(Approved in principle)

In order to ensure coherence, consistency, and appropriate alignment across institutional activities, all procedures shall be reviewed periodically to confirm their continued relevance, applicability, and compliance with existing frameworks. Such reviews shall be conducted in accordance with established review procedures, as set out in the *Policy on the Review of Policies*.

Procedures identified as overlapping, redundant, or insufficiently differentiated may be harmonised, consolidated, or otherwise adjusted, provided that such adjustments do not compromise transparency, accountability, or the appearance thereof. Where uncertainty exists, additional procedures may be developed to clarify the appropriate procedure to follow.

Responsibility for procedural alignment is shared across units, committees, and designated roles. No single actor shall be held solely responsible for outcomes arising from procedurally aligned processes, particularly where alignment has been achieved through collective deliberation.

Procedural alignment shall be understood as an ongoing process rather than a fixed state. Accordingly, alignment activities may generate further alignment needs, which shall be addressed in due course.

Part I — The Machinery

How the university functions, allegedly

This section examines the institutional mechanisms through which academic life is organised, regulated, and sustained. Committees, procedures, platforms, and policies are presented as neutral tools designed to support deliberation, ensure fairness, and distribute responsibility. In practice, they form a dense operational environment in which action is mediated, delayed, and frequently re-routed.

The chapters in this section focus on how institutional machinery acquires momentum of its own. Processes persist even when their original purposes are unclear, platforms become authoritative without being accountable, and bureaucracy is experienced less as coordination than as endurance. Responsibility is rarely denied outright; instead, it is deferred, distributed, or absorbed into procedure.

What follows does not suggest that institutions could function without machinery. Rather, it asks what happens when machinery becomes the primary site of institutional intelligence — and when functioning smoothly becomes more important than deciding well.

2. Why Every Academic Thinks They're Exceptionally Busy

A conference bar, a culture of overload, and the quiet work no one counts

The junior scholar had been standing near the hotel bar long enough to realise that the four senior academics had no intention of acknowledging her existence.

She was early-career, low enough in the hierarchy to be careful, with the practiced attentiveness of someone who had learned to be present without being intrusive. She had arrived at the conference prepared, slides rehearsed, questions anticipated, and had chaired her assigned session that morning to a half-empty room. Her badge sat slightly crooked, adjusted and readjusted over the course of the day. She held her glass with the care of someone acutely aware of where she was allowed to stand.

The four senior academics were seated in leather wing-backed chairs — heavy, dignified things designed to survive centuries of institutional life — arranged in a loose semicircle around a low table. On the table sat four glasses: two ports, dark and viscous; two whiskies, amber and expensive. The conference was technically still in session. Somewhere upstairs, a panel was unfolding to an audience of twelve. Down here, something far more authoritative was happening.

"I'm absolutely buried," said Professor One, leaning back and crossing one ankle over the opposite knee. The most senior of the four, and internationally visible, his conference badge listed five affiliations and a title that no longer corresponded to anything he did on a day-to-day basis. He travelled constantly, was regularly described as "in demand," and could no longer remember the last time he had declined an invitation without first apologising.

"Buried?" replied Professor Two, peering into his glass. A mid-career academic in perpetual motion, fluent in metrics, dashboards, and performance indicators, he spoke easily — almost lovingly — about workloads in terms of volume and flow. "Luxury. I remember being buried. These days I don't even have the dignity of burial. I just accumulate."

"Accumulate?" said Professor Three, narrowing his eyes. He had built his reputation on endurance — heavy teaching, endless supervision, and a quiet pride in having survived conditions he insisted were no longer properly appreciated. "When I was accumulating, I was grading one hundred twenty-page essays a week before Christmas."

"By hand," added Professor One, reflexively.

"Of course, by hand," said Professor Three. "With a pen. Red. None of this digital nonsense."

"Digital?" scoffed Professor Four, who had the strained alertness of someone permanently trapped inside administrative machinery. A senior figure now almost entirely absorbed by committees, platforms, and procedural oversight, he spoke the language of forms and workflows more fluently than that of his own discipline. "I'd kill for digital. Our platform crashes every time you click 'Save'. Sometimes it deletes your work just to remind you who's in charge."

They all nodded. A shared trauma had been invoked.

The junior scholar shifted her weight slightly. She checked her phone, then turned the screen face down and slipped it back into her pocket. Her badge read *Session Chair* — a role she had

taken seriously, though no one had asked her about it. She had learned — quickly — that being reliable, organised, and prepared was often invisible labour, and that listening carefully was frequently mistaken for having nothing to say.

She stayed where she was.

* * *

"I used to have a secretary," said Professor One, wistfully. "Full-time. Competent. Knew how to say no on my behalf."

"A unicorn," murmured Professor Two.

"She retired," Professor One continued. "They replaced her with a shared inbox and a set of guidelines."

"Guidelines?" said Professor Three. "We lost our administrative staff entirely. Now I am the administration."

"I once spent an entire morning filling out my own reimbursement form," said Professor Four. "Then it was rejected because I'd used the wrong version."

"Classic," said Professor Two. "I trained my last assistant myself. She left after six months. Said the job was 'unsustainable'."

They laughed softly, indulgently — the way people do once hardship has been converted into narrative.

At the bar, the junior scholar checked her phone. Two new emails. Both began with *Just a quick reminder*.

* * *

"I'm teaching logic again this term," said Professor Two, grimly.

"Intro?" asked Professor One.

"Yes. To a thousand engineering students."

"Unruly?" asked Professor Three.

"Ferociously," said Professor Two. "Last year they tried to mount an Austin Mini on the ceiling."

"Ambitious," said Professor Four.

"They weren't even subtle about it," Professor Two continued. "Mid-lecture. I turned around and there was scaffolding."

"I once taught while students were actively dismantling the furniture," said Professor Three. "Project-based learning."

They smiled. These were war stories, safely concluded.

"My teaching assistants walked out," said Professor One, casually.

"Walked out?" said Professor Four. "Mine went on a hunger strike."

“For abusive working conditions,” Professor One added. “Apparently grading two thousand pages in ten days wasn’t ‘reasonable’.”

“Standards,” said Professor Three, shaking his head. “They expect boundaries now.”

“Feedback,” said Professor Two. “They expect feedback. On every sentence.”

“I once gave feedback while asleep,” said Professor Three.

“You slept?” the others asked, in unison.

“Briefly,” he replied. “Between essays.”

“Students these days don’t realise how good they have it,” said Professor One.

The junior scholar glanced down at her annotated agenda and did not look up.

* * *

“At my worst,” said Professor Two, “I was supervising twenty-five graduate students.”

The junior scholar’s grip tightened slightly on her glass.

“Fifteen PhDs,” Professor Two continued. “Five wanted to defend in the same month.”

“Same week,” said Professor One.

“All convinced their thesis was my top priority,” said Professor Two. “The others were furious because I hadn’t read their chapters fast enough.”

“It’s not unsustainable,” he added, after a moment. “It’s just poorly optimised.”

“I get reminder emails,” said Professor Four. “Polite ones. With bullet points.”

“I get shared documents,” said Professor Three. “With comments appearing in real time.”

“Like surveillance,” said Professor One.

“Like judgment,” corrected Professor Three.

They drank.

* * *

“Of course,” said Professor Four, “none of this counts the meetings.”

“The meetings,” echoed Professor One, reverently.

“I once sat through a five-hour meeting,” said Professor Two, “during which my email inbox exploded.”

“Exploded?” said Professor Three. “Luxury. Mine multiplies.”

“I watched it happen in real time,” Professor Two continued. “Emails breeding. Replies spawning replies. ‘Following up on the previous follow-up.’”

“And you couldn’t respond,” said Professor One.

“I was still in the meeting,” said Professor Two. “Camera on. Microphone muted. Nodding periodically.”

“While your inbox burned,” said Professor Three.

“I once left a meeting,” said Professor Four, “with more work than when I entered.”

They paused. This was universally understood.

“At one point,” Professor Four added, “I was answering emails about the meeting while still in the meeting.”

“Recursive,” said Professor Three, appreciatively.

* * *

“I was asked to read a report once,” said Professor One.

“How long?” asked Professor Two.

“Fifty pages.”

“That’s manageable,” said Professor Three.

“They wanted a briefing note,” Professor One continued. “And a presentation. For government.”

The others leaned back.

“Prestigious,” said Professor Four.

“Very,” said Professor One. “Urgent.”

“When was the deadline?” asked Professor Two.

“Yesterday,” said Professor One.

“Of course,” said Professor Three.

“They said it would be quick,” Professor One added. “Just my ‘expert take’.”

“And you agreed,” said Professor Three, incredulous but impressed.

“Well,” said Professor One, adjusting his glass, “it was prestigious.”

“Did they read it?” asked Professor Four, already knowing the answer.

“No,” said Professor One.

“Did you at least present?” asked Professor Two.

“Yes.”

“To whom?” pressed Professor Two.

“People checking their phones,” Professor One replied.

They nodded. Prestige had been honoured.

* * *

“I’m racing to finish a Research Chair application,” said Professor Three.

“Oh no,” said Professor Two. “One of those.”

“Requirements thicker than a major project grant,” Professor Three continued. “Except without the coherence.”

“Strategic alignment matrices,” said Professor Four.

“Impact narratives,” said Professor Two.

“Equity frameworks,” said Professor One.

“I once wrote a chair application,” said Professor Four, grimly, “that made a grant application look like a two-hundred-and-fifty-word conference abstract.”

“With appendices,” added Professor Three.

“Always appendices,” said Professor Two.

“Which don’t matter,” said Professor One. “Because in the end it’s the form. Miss one box and the whole thing is returned.”

“Without explanation,” said Professor Four.

They drank.

* * *

It began, as these things often do, with a notification.

Professor Four’s phone vibrated first. He glanced down and frowned.

“That’s odd.”

“What?” asked Professor One.

“A meeting invite,” said Professor Four. “Added to my calendar without asking.”

“When?” asked Professor Two.

“Now,” said Professor Four. “Apparently I’m already late.”

Their phones buzzed again.

“Oh no,” said Professor Two quietly. “My inbox is exploding.”

“I’ve just been asked to approve documents I haven’t seen,” said Professor One.

“I’m being cc’d on decisions made in meetings I wasn’t at,” said Professor Three.

Professor Four was already typing. “The platform’s updated,” he said. “New workflow. Everything’s been reassigned.”

“Reassigned by whom?” asked Professor One.

“By the system,” said Professor Four. “It’s flagged a backlog.”

Calendars refreshed. Deadlines shifted forward. Reminders appeared for tasks they dimly remembered agreeing to.

“I’m revising a grant that was resubmitted without my input,” said Professor One.

“I’ve received reviewer comments on a report I thought was still a draft,” said Professor Two.

“I’ve just been reminded that I’m chairing a meeting tomorrow,” said Professor Three. “I don’t remember agreeing to chair it.”

“I’ve been copied on the follow-up explaining why the last meeting ran over time,” said Professor Four.

They fell silent, scrolling.

“I think,” said Professor One eventually, “this still counts as impact.”

“It’s definitely logged,” said Professor Two.

“I’m exhausted,” said Professor Three, with faint satisfaction. “Which means I’m doing something right.”

Professor Four nodded. “The dashboard looks very active today.”

“Is anyone actually doing any work?” asked Professor One.

They considered this. “No,” they said together.

Their phones buzzed again.

“Oh,” said Professor Four, brightening. “That explains it.”

“Explains what?” asked Professor Two.

“We’ve all been added,” said Professor Four, “to a new working group.”

“A working group?” said Professor One.

“To address academic workload,” said Professor Four. “Pilot phase.”

“Who’s on it?” asked Professor Three.

Professor Four looked up. “Us.”

They nodded. This made sense.

They stood, slightly unsteady, and raised their glasses.

“To busyness,” said Professor Three.

“To excellence under impossible conditions,” said Professor Two.

“To service,” said Professor One.

“To ourselves,” said Professor Four.

The glasses clinked. A phone buzzed.

* * *

At the bar, the junior scholar did not look up. She placed her glass down carefully, paid her bill, and slipped her badge into her bag. She headed upstairs, where she was due to chair a late-afternoon session. No one noticed her leave.

The room was already open when she arrived. She set her notes on the table, checked the time, and waited. No one came. She stayed until the session officially ended anyway — the readings

selected, the questions thought through, the timing planned. When it was over, she gathered her papers, not out of obligation but out of habit.

On her way back to her room, her phone vibrated. She did not stop walking.

It wasn't that she wasn't busy. She was. The work was real, the hours long, the expectations diffuse and often unspoken. But she had begun to understand something the men downstairs had never needed to learn — that not all labour announces itself, and that not all busyness deserves applause.

She decided, quietly, what she would count.

3. The Committee of Eternal Deliberation

A longitudinal study in bureaucratic inertia

Author's note

This chapter adopts the form of a longitudinal institutional case study to examine how committees designed to support deliberation can become self-sustaining structures that delay or displace decision-making. Drawing on familiar procedural rituals — agendas, subcommittees, minutes, mandates — it exaggerates their internal logic to make visible how deliberation can persist independently of outcomes. The focus is not on individuals, but on institutional dynamics that reward process over judgment and continuity over resolution.

The story begins

Since 1973, the *Committee of Eternal Deliberation* has been meeting to finalise the agenda for its next meeting. It has not yet succeeded. The members rotate, the minutes accumulate, and the hospitality budget for coffee, tea and biscuits mysteriously inflates like a slow-moving bubble economy. No one remembers who originally convened the committee. Legend has it the first Chair was swallowed by a subcommittee that failed to report back — or perhaps was never meant to.

No decision is too small to require a subcommittee. No subcommittee can act without a working group. And every working group must conduct a systematic literature review of all documentation produced by previous working groups (minutes, drafts, and the rare report), any pertinent scientific literature and university policies, and identify those documents that don't yet exist. The projected timeline for deliverables is "one year," which everyone recognises as a polite synonym for "never." There is no staff support, and no one is willing to be the meeting secretary. The members are busy, the deliverables hypothetical. Still, enthusiasm is expressed, motions are approved, and another spreadsheet is born — immaculate and unread.

The current Chair of the Committee of Eternal Deliberation, Professor Geraldine Mott, has been on sabbatical since 1998 but continues to send regrets from an undisclosed location (rumoured to be a long-term writing retreat in a monastery that doesn't exist). The Vice-Chair, Prof. Lionel Crump, assumed leadership by default and rules with the authority of a substitute lecturer who has lost control of the class — and whose PowerPoint slides are in Latin, accidentally — but insists everything is fine. "We must maintain order," he says, banging a gavel he found in the archives, though it later turned out to be the handle of an old umbrella.

The committee's mission is simple in theory: to finalise an agenda for its next meeting. In practice, this has required 52 years of sustained institutional performance art.

The agenda

Each meeting begins with a vote to approve the agenda. Then someone moves to approve the motion to approve the agenda, countered by a motion to vote against the motion to vote. A secret ballot is demanded, followed by a motion to approve the use of a secret ballot. By the time quorum is confirmed, two members have resigned, one has been replaced by a potted fern (named Acting Assistant Vice-Dean Sprout, rumoured to have once chaired the Department of Photosynthesis), and the agenda item under discussion has been rendered obsolete by the passage of time.

The agenda itself, meticulously prepared by Prof. Penelope Varnish, is a page long but takes weeks to produce. It includes such timeless items as "Review of the Review of the Draft Mandate" and "Discussion of the Ethics of Discussing Ethics." There's also a standing item called "Other Business," which has been "carried forward" since 1979.

The minutes, lovingly recorded by Prof. Tobias Quill, capture every eyebrow raise and sigh. His 180-page record of the May 2014 meeting includes the immortal line: "After extensive discussion, it was agreed that the committee was not ready to agree." One meeting famously spent three hours debating whether "collaborative" should be replaced by "collegial." The compromise term, "synergistic," was chosen because no one understood what it meant, but everyone agreed it sounded important.

Scheduling subsequent meetings is itself an epic quest. Months are spent sending Doodles. Quorum is reached only when enough senior faculty log in from other meetings or forget to log out entirely. One emeritus member joined a session from a beach in Bali, camera off, audio muted, yet somehow voted twice — once in favour, once in abstention. When asked how this was possible, the secretary replied, "We don't have the mandate to investigate. We must strike a subcommittee."

Academic performativity

Prof. Crump runs meetings as if he's a beleaguered general on the battlefield. "Point of order!" he yells, silencing the revolutionaries — Prof. Simone Kettle and Prof. Rajiv D'Souza — who lead a procedural resistance cell known as *The Vanguard of Procedural Integrity*. They plot coups via side chats and deploy strategic abstentions to undermine the Chair's authority.

They've mastered the dark art of weaponizing Robert's Rules of Order. At one meeting, Prof. Kettle raised a point of order on whether points of order could themselves be ordered. The resulting meta-debate lasted six weeks and led to the formation of the Subcommittee on the Sequencing of Points, which later split into factions over whether points should be sequenced alphabetically or by emotional intensity.

Tensions sometimes spill beyond the procedural. During a particularly fraught session on "clarifying the mandate of the mandate," Prof. Felix Morningside and Prof. Kettle entered into a full-volume dispute over the proper interpretation of "collegial process." Voices escalated, papers fluttered, and finally Prof. Kettle stood, declared "This is an affront to deliberative democracy!", and stormed out, slamming the heavy wooden door with tragic finality. The echo lingered like a confused intern waiting for instructions that will never come.

No one moved. Prof. Crump cleared his throat and asked, "Shall we record that as dissent or abstention?" The secretary, after a pause, wrote "absent (with emphasis)."

Colleagues posture and grandstand. Prof. Morningside transforms every question into a ten-minute monologue. Prof. Clara Finch speaks immediately after him to say she "largely agrees, but from a different epistemic standpoint." The committee nods gravely, aware that "epistemic" means it's time for another coffee break.

Some pretend to pay attention while emailing. Others don't bother pretending. A few, like Professor Harold Blint, fall asleep mid-vote — a state known as *quorum by osmosis*. Still, he counts toward attendance and remains one of the most assiduous and productive members.

Finding consensus

Every document, draft, and Doodle is circulated under the guise of feedback. This is not to obtain insight but to demonstrate the appearance of consultation. Drafts are sent to "stakeholders," who may or may not exist, and whose silence is interpreted as endorsement. When feedback does arrive, it is so extensive that a new working group must be formed to integrate it. Their first step: circulate a Doodle.

One policy on "Ethical Excellence" was circulated twelve times. The final version was identical to the first, save for a logo redesign and a footnote referencing "broad stakeholder input." That input came from a single automated reply: "*Thank you for your message. I am out of office indefinitely.*"

At one point, a member ventured a radical suggestion: "Perhaps we could just take a decision." The room fell silent. Prof. Crump looked appalled. "Without consultation?" he whispered, as if she'd suggested burning a library or skipping the coffee break.

The Eternal Committee worships consensus, though no one agrees on what that means. Some define it as "everyone agrees," while others, more pragmatically, read it as "no one objects loudly enough to trigger another vote." Endless technical debates sabotage even this fragile definition.

During one fateful meeting in 2002, a discussion about adopting a shared vision devolved into a philosophical argument about power. "I'm being repressed!" shouted Prof. Kettle. "You can't repress me," countered Prof. Crump, "I have a mandate!"

"From whom?" asked D'Souza.

"From the previous Chair."

"Who?"

"She's still on sabbatical."

"Exactly."

Arguments circle like vultures, slightly rephrased each time. By the fourth iteration, no one remembers the original motion, but asking for clarification would be procedurally irregular. Eventually, the Chair declares, "It seems we have broad agreement to defer." The motion passes unanimously.

The Committee on Committees

In 1986, the university created a *Committee on Committees* to bring "coherence and efficiency" to campus governance. It quickly became the most powerful body in the institution — part administrative engine, part shadowy cabal. Members wore robes, spoke in procedural Latin, and met in a candlelit chamber accessible only by keycard and incantation. Their authority was absolute. Every committee existed only by their grace.

Naturally, they turned their gaze upon the Eternal Committee.

At first, the relationship was one of polite observation. The Committee on Committees dispatched auditors to "assess procedural compliance." The auditors returned pale and trembling, muttering about recursive motions, self-replicating subcommittees, and a set of minutes that seemed to be writing themselves, possibly in iambic pentameter. One described

the Eternal Committee as "a kind of bureaucratic black hole where nothing escapes, not even decisions."

The Committee on Committees declared the Eternal Committee obsolete and moved to dissolve it. The motion passed unanimously.

And that's when the rebellion began.

The Eternal Committee rose in revolt. After decades of quiet deliberation, they snapped. Wielding clipboards like cutlasses, the members stormed the upper administration building, commandeering the agenda, annexing the coffee supply, declaring the break room a sovereign state, and mandating procedural independence.

"We reject your mandate!" shouted Vice-Chair Crump, brandishing the sacred Gavel of Order. "Henceforth we will self-govern, pending quorum!"

The Committee on Committees was stunned. A Subcommittee on Insurgency was formed immediately to study the uprising. Its first report concluded that "further consultation may be required."

Meanwhile, the Eternal Committee — now operating as *The Free and Independent Board of Deliberative Persons (Interim)* — began issuing its own decrees. They sailed metaphorically across campus, raiding other departments' minutes, liberating old mandates, and redistributing agenda items. Witnesses recall them shouting, "Motion carried!" as they vanished down corridors trailing Post-it notes like victory flags — and one rogue stapler.

For a brief, glorious month, the Eternal Committee ruled the university. The hospitality budget was doubled. All meetings were declared "provisional celebrations." A motion was passed to "suspend time until further notice."

Then, inevitably, came the counter-revolt. The Committee on Committees convened an Emergency Council, ratified a new Policy on Procedural Discipline, and retook control — not by force, but by scheduling. The rebels were invited to a joint meeting "to clarify their terms of reference." They never escaped.

Today, the two bodies are indistinguishable. Each records the other's minutes. Each claims to oversee the other's mandate. And somewhere, buried deep in the archives, the original motion to dissolve the Eternal Committee remains "pending approval prior to implementation."

Each decision still begins the same way: "Before we move to the motion, we must clarify what we mean by 'move' and 'motion.'" A glossary was drafted but lost in peer review — or possibly eaten by the departmental hamster.

The myth of closure

Every few years, hope flickers. Someone suggests, boldly, that the committee "wrap up its work." A Closure Task Force is formed to determine how one might possibly close an eternal committee. It meets quarterly, reports annually, and has produced exactly three drafts of Preliminary Framework for Tentative Conclusions (Version 0.1), which includes a flowchart, a haiku, and a footnote referencing a dream someone had about closure.

At the 2025 meeting, a daring soul proposed: *stop meeting*. Procedurally impossible. You can't dissolve a committee without first approving an agenda for dissolution. The motion was tabled, naturally, for future discussion.

Prof. Mott remains on sabbatical. Prof. Crump's gavel has vanished into a black hole of bureaucracy. Somewhere, a subcommittee has been quietly convened to study the feasibility of finalising the draft agenda — quorum pending, naturally.

And still the hum continues — the sacred shuffle of papers, the half-empty coffee cups, the whispered amendments, the eternal refrain "All in favour of deferring?" Motion carried. Forever.

4. Dealing with Bureaucracy

How to find a path through the labyrinth

Author's note
This chapter adopts the structure of a navigational guide to parody how bureaucratic systems distribute responsibility, obscure authority, and normalize procedural endurance. Its branching form mirrors the experience of navigating administrative processes in which progress is rarely linear and outcomes remain uncertain.

. . .

Welcome, traveler. You stand at the threshold of a realm governed not by logic, but by obscure regulations, outdated information websites, idiosyncratic online platforms, and the mysterious whims of administrative personnel. Office hours are a myth, emails and forms vanish into the ether, and the answer to most every question is, "Have you checked the institutional website?"

This is not a tale for the faint of heart. It's a chronicle of lost documents, circular email chains, and the eternal quest for the elusive signature and "final approval." Whether you are a first-year student looking for a copy of your transcript, a weary graduate student trying to get paid, or a faculty member who dared to request a room change, you will likely have experienced circuitous paths, full of riddles, red tape, and at least one mandatory workshop.

Choose wisely. The fate of your sanity may depend on it.

To begin your journey into the Labyrinth of University Bureaucracy, proceed to **Paragraph 2**. Unless you've already been there, in which case, skip to **Paragraph 7**. But if you're feeling brave and are convinced that you have all the necessary paperwork to support your request, start with **Paragraph 1** — though be wary as the Sphinx is a riddler and may not let you pass.

Paragraph 1: The Sphinx Awaits

You arrive at the gates of the Labyrinth with what you assume to be a simple request — you seek to have your recent conference registration fees and travel expenses reimbursed.

A Sphinx blocks your path. It asks:

"Have you submitted Form 27-B in triplicate, with original signatures and a scanned copy uploaded through the university administrative portal?"

You hesitate. You didn't even know there was a portal.

- If you answered "yes," proceed to **Paragraph 4**.
- If you answered "no," go to **Paragraph 2** and try again.
- If you're unsure, skip to **Paragraph 7** and hope for the best.

Paragraph 2: The Labyrinth

University bureaucracy is not a single entity. It's a sprawling, multi-headed beast. Some parts of the system are shockingly efficient — like the departmental secretary who processes your requests in under 48 hours and can always find a solution even when everyone else tells you that it's impossible (a unicorn, surely).

Others are less so. Some offices and personnel seem to exist solely to say "no," or to protect their own obscure domain by enforcing rules with the rigidity of a medieval guild. You once

submitted a form to request a form. That form required a pre-approval form. The pre-approval form required a hand-written signature (certainly not digital!) from your department director, who was at a conference and unreachable. You cried.

- To understand how to survive this, jump to **Paragraph 5**.
- If you're already overwhelmed, skip to **Paragraph 8** for a moment of reflection.

Paragraph 3: The Oracle

You seek guidance. You find the Oracle of Human Resources. She speaks in acronyms and riddles.

"Have you completed the EDI-TRK-2025-A?"

You nod slowly. She smiles.

"That was deprecated last year. You'll need the EDI-TRK-2026-Beta. It's only available on the internal SharePoint, accessible with the institutional VPN, but only on Tuesdays… and not if you're using a Mac."

The Oracle can answer your questions but will never do so directly. You must work to interpret the answers.

- If you've deciphered the riddle, proceed to **Paragraph 12**.
- If you're still confused, go to **Paragraph 5**.

Paragraph 4: The Illusion of Progress

You think you've made it. You've submitted the form, obtained all the necessary signatures, navigated the byzantine complexity of the institutional portal and uploaded the correct PDF form and all the supporting documents: taxi, restaurant and hotel receipts, all clearly scanned into a PDF (you keep the paper copies… just in case), and supported these with a detailed Excel listing all the items, amounts, dates and locations of expenditures.

Then you receive an email:

"Please resubmit using the updated form — the one you used is from last year — and attach all missing documentation, as required in Regulation 10.3, sub-article 23.6."

No one told you about Regulation 10.3, or that sub-article 23.6 requires that you include the conference agenda, highlighting your place in it, to prove that you actually attended the event.

Surely the travel documentation you submitted is proof enough? No, you're not trusted by the administration. You scream silently into the void.

- Return to **Paragraph 1** to face the Sphinx again.
- If you're ready to fight back, proceed to **Paragraph 10**.

Paragraph 5: Allies in the Maze

The secret to surviving the Labyrinth is finding allies. Seemingly at random, and often when all paths seem to be dead-ends, you encounter a member of the administrative personnel who actually answers your emails, who knows the system, and who's willing to help.

You were told that your claim couldn't be processed because you were missing a justificatory document or receipt? Did they mention that you can fill in a 1-page form stating on your

honour that you spent this amount, but don't have a receipt? Here's the form, and don't worry, I know who to talk with get this approved.

Cultivate this relationship. Be kind and respectful. Treat this person like the invaluable colleague that they are. Bring them coffee… and chocolates…and cookies. Food greases the wheels of administrations.

But also know when to escalate. Some "no's" are definitive while others are just placeholders until you can talk to the senior manager or director. You must learn to read the difference.

When escalating, be polite but firm, explaining why your request is reasonable, supported by articles from relevant policy or regulation. Mobilize other senior allies from your department and faculty (department directors, vice-deans).

- If you've found your ally, proceed to **Paragraph 11**.
- If you're still searching, detour to **Paragraph 3**.

Paragraph 6: Administrative Death

You've died. Not in the literal sense, of course — though your spirit may beg to differ. Somewhere between the Human Resources Department and the Financial Services Portal, you took a wrong turn, failed to submit Form 27-B in triplicate, and were promptly swallowed by the Pit of Incomplete Documentation. Your emails echo unanswered in the void, your institutional ID card no longer opens doors, and your academic progress bar has frozen at 87%. You're now a ghost in the system, doomed to wander the halls whispering, "I have all the necessary documentation" and "I just need one signature" to those who you pass in the Labyrinth and who still have hope.

- If you chance upon a guide, proceed to **Paragraph 11**.
- If a secretary's door is open, go to **Paragraph 5**.
- If there's no hope, cut your losses, abandon the project and go to **Paragraph 15**.

Paragraph 7: Paper Proofs

After many detours, you learned to keep all paper copies of your travel receipts, even if it was only for a coffee, you can prove that these expenses were all justified, and they fit within the maximum daily expense allowance (the per diem hasn't been increased in decades and isn't aligned with international currency-exchanges).

You're then told that you must submit the printed boarding pass for your flight, bus and train trips. Not show it on your phone. Not email it. Print it. On paper. You wonder if this is a test of your credulity — "are they really so gullible?" — or worse, that it's all part of a sinister game by senior finance officers to drive you and other academics insane.

You're convinced that you can hear the Sphinx laughing.

You don't have the original boarding pass, but you do have the electronic versions. You find the one printer in your department that still works. It's out of toner. And the secretary who you could ask to replace it is on break.

- If you've printed the boarding cards and other paper proofs, go to **Paragraph 13**.
- If you've given up, go to **Paragraph 3**.

Paragraph 8: The Weight of It All

You're the person who others rely upon for tips and tricks to navigate the system. You've gotten past the Sphinx on multiple occasions; you've deciphered the Oracle's arcane riddles and know where to get the latest version of all the key forms (a closely guarded secret that you share with a trusted few). You know the key people in the different administrative services who can open doors that are otherwise always locked.

But the forms, the surveys, the continuous networking, the endless reporting… it's exhausting. And the bureaucracy and audit culture are growing. Accountability is important, but when it's rooted in a systematic distrust of all members of the institution, it becomes destructive. Instead of a tool to ensure efficient and effective operations, administrative systems can build disengagement and worse, engender the short-cuts and abuse that they seek to prevent.

As the support person for your colleagues, you question the time and energy you have to invest in this invisible labour. You wonder if anyone cares once they get the advice they need to navigate the Labyrinth.

- If you need a break, pause here.
- When you're ready, proceed to **Paragraph 13**.

Paragraph 9: Research Ethics

Research ethics services are a crucially important part of the research environment, as they provide both upstream advice to researchers and downstream validation of a protocol to ensure that it meets the highest ethical standards. But its operationalization can sometimes be nightmarish.

You have to submit your research protocol through a web platform that is supposed to accelerate the review process. It does the opposite. The platform looks like it was built in the 1990s, has a dozen horizontal tabs (separate pages), each with a dozen vertical menus. All must be completed, even when they're irrelevant to your project.

You made the mistake of being overly ambitious and tried to conduct a multi-centre project. Little did you realize that each institution required you to submit a separate application — and each required different changes. Despite having prepared well in advance, you spent more time filling out the online ethics form than you did conducting the actual research.

Your protocol was treated like a high risk randomized controlled drug trial when it was a low-risk interview-based study about lifestyle choices. You tried to explain this to the research ethics board, to no avail.

- If you've experienced this, proceed to **Paragraph 10**.
- If you're still hopeful, return to **Paragraph 5**.

Paragraph 10: The Art of Strategic Delay

Sometimes, the best strategy is to wait. Bureaucracies are in constant flux, so the person blocking your request today may be gone in six months. And the person replacing them might be a friend — or at the very least, not your enemy.

When you receive a "no" or a seemingly irrational request, don't immediately go "over their head" to the manager — this runs the risk of your request being seen as an attack on them and

their team, and can lead to an even more forceful "no", with reference to additional regulations, making it clear, in no uncertain terms, that you'll never, ever, get a "yes".

Instead, the strategic thing to do is say "I understand, thank you for your time", and explore other paths, all the while keeping in mind that this path may open up in the future. "No" is not always definitive.

You've learned to play the long game. You've learned that patience and silence are sometimes key elements to an effective and winning strategy.

- If you're patient, proceed to **Paragraph 14**.
- If you're not, return to **Paragraph 4** and try again.

Paragraph 11: The Guide

You've built a network. You know who to call. You know who can help with what issue. You've learned that not every confrontation needs to be a battle. You've learned to reframe problems, to understand the interests behind the rules, to mobilize firm but respectful language to reasonably present your needs, and to find compromises that work.

You've even helped others navigate the Labyrinth. You're now a guide for other members of your department and faculty who're facing the hurdles of university bureaucracy.

- Congratulations. You may now proceed to **Paragraph 15**.
- Or, if you're feeling cynical, detour to **Paragraph 12**.

Paragraph 12: The Apology Strategy

Sometimes, it's easier to apologize than to ask for permission.

You didn't file all the supporting documentation on time? "Ok, here it is — it was just a minor oversight." You didn't get pre-approval? "Oops, sorry!" The event went well, the students and personnel were happy, and no one died. You'll be more careful next time and make sure to ask for approval before starting, "I promise". Maybe.

You've learned that some rules are more flexible than they appear, and that sometimes a slap on the wrist is less costly than the delays accrued from asking permission.

- If this worked, proceed to **Paragraph 14**.
- If it backfired, return to **Paragraph 1** and start over.

Paragraph 13: Damage Control

The salary planned for your research assistant has been re-evaluated at 50% over what you expected, and you're now far over budget. Payments to students have been delayed, because, as it turns out, the electronic transfer was emailed to someone else with the same name ("student.1@" instead of "student.2@"). Your suppliers and service providers have gone unpaid for two months and are complaining vociferously, threatening to never work with you or your university again.

You've got to do something, because people are relying on you.

- If you've figured out a solution, proceed to **Paragraph 5**.
- If you're nodding because you've already solved it, go to **Paragraph 14**.
- If you're shaking your head, return to **Paragraph 8**.

Paragraph 14: The Long Game

You've stopped seeing every issue with the administration as a confrontation, as a win/lose scenario. You ask: Why is this path blocked? What's the real concern, and for whom? What interests are at stake? How can I help respond to these?

You listen. You question politely, but firmly. You adapt. You find a way forward.

You've learned to navigate not just the system, but the culture behind it — one that is made up of rules, regulations, and policies, but also people, habits, and personalities.

You know who to talk with at different levels and have even been able to create new paths through the Labyrinth to more efficiently (sometimes) get to the much sought after destination.

- If you've made peace with the Labyrinth, proceed to **Paragraph 15**.
- If you're still fighting, return to **Paragraph 10**.

Paragraph 15: The Exit

You've survived. For now. The Labyrinth is still there. The Sphinx still waits with a new riddle. The Oracle's words are still opaque. But you've learned the paths, the shortcuts, and found allies to help you along the way. You've learned that bureaucracy is a system. And like any system, it can be navigated, reshaped, and sometimes, even outwitted.

Until next time.

5. Managing Conflicts of Interest in Thesis Juries

On the ethics of procedural distance

Author's note
This chapter examines how conflict-of-interest policies, designed to protect academic integrity, can expand into elaborate procedural systems that prioritize formal distance over substantive judgment. Through narrative exaggeration, it explores how ethical safeguards may inadvertently undermine expertise, trust, and proportionality — particularly in small or specialized academic fields.

Scene 1: The email that launched a thousand forms

It began, as all Canadian academic tragedies do, with an email from the graduate secretary responsible for PhD juries.

Subject: URGENT — Thesis Jury Non-Compliant with COI Policy (Version 12.3.1, Re-Revised)

Somewhere in the administrative tundra, a staff member had discovered that my proposed external examiner, Professor Dupont, had co-authored a paper with me back in 2018. The title of the offending article? *Ethical Considerations in the Ethical Consideration of Ethics.* Impact factor: negligible. Moral fallout: catastrophic.

Apparently, this constituted a Category 2 Relational Overlap under the Conflict-of-Interest Matrix, meaning Dupont was now ineligible to assess anything I'd ever touched, thought about, or appeared near in an academic context.

The instructions were clear: "Please identify an alternate examiner with whom neither you nor the student have any prior research, supervisory, professional, or coincidental social interactions."

Coincidental social interactions. An inspired category, suggesting that even standing in the same coffee line could corrupt the integrity of knowledge production and neutral evaluations.

I did what any reasonable person would do: I opened a spreadsheet and began listing every qualified scholar in the field, then deleting them one by one like a slow game of Minesweeper.

Co-authored with me? Deleted.

Co-authored with the student? Deleted.

Co-authored with someone who once co-authored with me? Deleted, to be safe.

Liked one of my social media posts? Deleted. The optics were unacceptable.

Within twenty minutes, the only remaining option was a retired professor of veterinary medicine specialising in bovine bioethics.

I wrote to him, apologising for the intrusion and explaining that his expertise in ethical frameworks for cattle might transfer well to public health ethics.

He declined, citing "bad Internet connection" and, more devastatingly, "personal integrity."

Scene 2: The Committee for the Ethical Evaluation of Ethical Evaluators

With no one left to call, I solicited the Committee for the Ethical Evaluation of Ethical Evaluators (CEEEE), a subcommittee of the Graduate Program Committee, itself a subcommittee of Faculty Council, reporting directly to the Vice-Dean for Procedural Integrity.

The meeting opened, as tradition requires, with a reading of the Preamble to the Conflict-of-Interest Charter.

Eight pages. No illustrations.

The guiding principles were projected under the heading VALUES — which is how you know they're about to become requirements.

- **Transparency:** Everyone must declare everything to everyone, indefinitely.
- **Impartiality:** Evaluators must demonstrate professional impartiality and emotional frostbite.
- **Proportionality:** Unclear, but extremely important.

After five minutes of thoughtful silence, the committee debated whether "conflict" should be capitalised in all official documents.

The motion passed unanimously.

Democracy in action.

Someone proposed that the committee also adopt a procedural land acknowledgement for conflicts of interest, recognising that all scholarly relationships occur on unceded terrain of power, hierarchy, and awkward conference receptions.

It was received warmly and forwarded to a Working Group, which immediately scheduled a retreat.

"So what do I do," I asked, "if the only actual experts have, at some point, co-authored with me, sat on a panel with me, or shared oxygen at a conference?"

The committee chair smiled. The kind of smile you see in people who believe deeply in process. "We don't need *experts*," she said. "We need *eligible evaluators*."

Scene 3: The declaration of conflicts (and other existential questions)

The committee agreed to an interim solution: I would submit three names "as a starting point," each accompanied by a *Declaration of Conflicts of Interest* form, a narrative justification, and a brief statement confirming that the candidate had not:

- co-authored with the student or supervisor,
- competed for the same grant in the past five years,
- or shared a morally compromising coffee.

If the committee found all three "too close," I would widen the radius — geographically, disciplinarily, and spiritually — until we located someone far enough away to be pure.

"In other words," I said, "we need an evaluator who has never met us, never heard of us, and ideally doesn't know anything about our field."

"Now you understand," said the Chair.

The committee congratulated itself on having protected integrity. I went home to begin the only real work the institution had assigned me: filling out the forms.

What followed was a twelve-page administrative odyssey and a small test of metaphysics.

The form had to be submitted through LimeSurvey — the university's electronic confessional — which timed out reliably on the final page, like a system designed by someone whose moral theory is that *suffering builds character*.

The concluding affirmation read: "I declare, to the best of my knowledge, that I have not experienced or imagined any conflictual proximity, real or metaphorical, with the supervisor or student." It was, in essence, a vow of academic chastity.

I emailed the secretary to ask whether "conflictual proximity" included the fact that I once read Dupont's book and found it… good. She replied that subjective impressions were "not currently covered," but that a revision was expected in Version 12.3.2.

Scene 4: The discovery of "critical distance"

Eventually, even the most devoted procedural purists began to notice a problem: the five-year exclusion rule was unsustainable.

Not because it was unreasonable in theory, but because, in practice, everyone had co-authored with everyone else at least once — especially in specialised fields, where the community is small and the conferences have the intimate feel of a family reunion, except nobody talks about politics, and everyone pretends peer review is fair.

At this point, a subtle shift occurred. The question was no longer whether Dupont was too close to be eligible, but whether anyone not like Dupont could plausibly evaluate the work at all. Proximity, it seemed, was no longer the problem. Scarcity was.

So CEEEE held an emergency retreat.

Two days in a windowless room. One bad coffee machine. Three flip charts. A spirited debate that lasted long enough to constitute its own minor conflict of interest.

By the end, the committee introduced a new concept: *Critical Distance*, a flexible standard for determining whether a potential evaluator was "close enough to understand the work, but far enough to disapprove of it objectively."

This was presented as an ethical breakthrough, which is what committees call anything that allows them to keep functioning, and, more importantly, it allowed the email chain to continue.

The committee agreed that ethical proximity could be managed through a colour-coded system, because once something has colours, it becomes objective.

A Critical Distance Rubric was born:

- Green — No known contact: "Never heard of them."
- Yellow — Shared research interest: "We once liked each other's social media posts."

- Orange — Professional overlap: "We served on the same panel 10 years ago."
- Red — Structural entanglement: "We share a grant, a lab, a student, a dog, or a worldview."

The rubric was immediately celebrated as "nuanced" and "context-sensitive," which in university language means: *it will generate meetings, PowerPoints, and at least one webinar.*

Posters were printed. Icons were designed. Someone suggested a traffic-light lanyard for committee members, so that critical distance could be assessed at a glance without the inconvenience of judgment.

The Vice-Dean approved the concept on the condition that the rubric be reviewed, clarified, and validated by a dedicated subcommittee to ensure that "critical distance" was properly operationalised and not confused with either indulgence or indifference.

A fair concern. In the wrong hands, that could become a leadership model.

Scene 5: The conflict of interest liaison function

Once you create a rubric, you need enforcement. This is an institutional law of nature.

So the faculty appointed a Conflict of Interest Liaison Officer — a person whose job was to detect relational contamination across time, space, and bibliographic databases.

They were given access to:

- publication records
- grant databases
- conference programmes
- the invisible network of mutual academic favours that powers the universe
- and, inexplicably, LinkedIn

I received a follow-up email.

Subject: COI Flag Raised — Potential Proximity Event Detected

The Liaison Officer had discovered that my student and Dupont had once been present at the same conference in 2020. Not on the same panel. Not in the same session. In the same building.

This was classified as a Category 3 Ambient Association.

I pointed out that conferences are, in fact, designed so that scholars may occupy the same building.

I was told the committee appreciated my "feedback," and that my concern would be recorded for future consultation.

A consultation process was launched.

Scene 6: The ceremony of approval

After months of forms, cross-checking, interpretive rubrics, and minor psychological damage, the final jury list was ready — containing, with appropriate caveats and colour-coding, the same names that had been deemed impossible at the outset.

It had been reviewed by three committees, signed in triplicate, notarised, and blessed by the Office of the Vice-Dean.

Finally, the confirmation arrived:

Subject: Jury Composition Conditionally Approved (Pending Review of Reviewer Review)

The defence was scheduled. The student wept with relief. I poured a drink. Then, one week before the defence, a sharp-eyed administrator noticed that an internal examiner had once acknowledged my name in a grant report from 2021.

Not cited. Not praised. Acknowledged. In the thank-you section.

The file was reopened. The forms resurrected. The circle of ethical life complete.

At that point, the student asked — very calmly, with the drained serenity of someone who has stared into the void — whether they could simply defend their thesis to an empty room, under oath, in front of a neutral plant.

I said no. The plant, regrettably, had previously served on a committee with me.

6. The Web Platform from Hell

An infinite loop of accountability and despair

Author's note
This chapter, which was written with Marie-Alexandra Gagné, examines how digital platforms transform bureaucratic authority by embedding rules, assumptions, and constraints directly into technical systems. Presented as a user interface rather than a policy, the platform becomes the decision-maker, displacing responsibility onto design choices, default settings, and error messages. The chapter exaggerates these features to show how procedural power increasingly operates through software that cannot be questioned, appealed to, or reasoned with.

. . .

You know the one.

The clunky, beige-toned administrative website that is a relic from the early 2000s yet somehow still holds the keys to your academic soul: your ethics certificates, your finances, your ability to prove that you exist as a legitimate researcher.

It is not optional. It is not avoidable. It is **The Platform**.

The platform greets you with 10 tabs across the top of the window and 7 down the side, a design choice clearly inspired by Dante's lesser-known *Appendix of Circles*. Each tab reveals columns, and each column reveals pages, and each page asks questions that do not — and will never — apply to your project.

[System Prompt]

Q: Does your study involve the transportation of radioactive chimpanzees across international borders?

[ ] Yes

[ ] No

[ ] Not Yet

If "No," please upload a 7-page justification.

The architecture of despair

The genius of the platform is its sheer redundancy. Nothing is asked once when it can be asked three times, in slightly different formats, with mutually incompatible instructions.

You are asked to describe your project:

- Once in 250 characters.
- Once in 250 words.
- Once in 25 pages with references in Vancouver style.

Each version must contain exactly the same information while also being substantially different. Each field is constrained so you cannot go over by even one character, otherwise it will not save.

The platform does not believe in "copy-paste." The platform believes in trial by repetition.

[Patch Notes v6.4.1]

- **NEW!** Added "Describe your project in haiku form" as a required field.
- **BUG FIX:** System no longer crashes when you type the letter "é." Now it just deletes your file.
- **UPCOMING:** Mandatory double-authentication verification each time you hit "Save".

The approval chain

Then comes the submission. You think the hard part is over? Fool, you've seen nothing yet.

Your application enters the validation chain, a bureaucratic obstacle course requiring confirmation by multiple authorities, each more improbable than the last.

- **Your Department Chair**, who hasn't logged into the system in the last 6 months — and has forgotten how it works (assuming he can also find his unique identifier and password).
- **A financial services agent named Sharon**. Nobody has met Sharon, but she holds the second-most powerful position in your academic life. Rumour has it that she's a chatbot; others think that she retired a decade ago, but no one updated her status in the validation chain.
- **The University Librarian**, whose role, somehow, is to ensure you aren't plagiarizing radioactive chimpanzee transport protocols. This person is helpful and well-meaning but buried with 50 emails per day from panicking researchers and students.
- **The Vice-Dean of Finance**, whose approval screen doesn't work in Chrome, Safari, or Firefox. He insists all submissions be printed, signed, and couriered to his office, where they are carefully scanned back into the system by a work-study student. If you ask what exactly he's approving, the answer is vague: "financial coherence." No one knows what that means, but it sounds reassuring enough to remain a permanent step.
- **The Ethics Board Administrator**, who needs your "handwritten signature," a phrase last heard in the Napoleonic Wars. The administrator will not accept a digital signature, nor a scanned copy, nor a certified fax. The ink must be real, the paper tangible, the courier preferably horse-drawn. Once received, the document is filed in a locked cabinet that nobody has opened since 2003, but which must exist for "compliance purposes."

And here's the kicker: none of them know why they're on the chain. They only know that clicking "approve" makes the notification disappear.

[Helpdesk Transcript #112]

User: Hi, the system won't let me submit my protocol.
Helpdesk: Have you tried clearing your cache?
User: I did, but it erased my entire file.
Helpdesk: Perfect, that's expected behaviour by the system. Please start again.

* * *

User: It says my application is "Pending Meta-Validation." What does that mean?
Helpdesk: That means someone else must confirm that your validators are authorized to validate.
User: Who validates them?
Helpdesk: Sharon.

* * *

User: Hello, I can't log in. It says my password is invalid. Could you please reset it?
Helpdesk: Certainly. To reset your password, please click the "Lost Password" button.
User: There is no "Lost Password" button.
Helpdesk: Correct. Send an email to Administrative Services requesting a manual reset.
User: Okay, I've done that, but they haven't replied. It's been eight days.
Helpdesk: Yes, they're quite busy this time of year (which is to say: always). Please allow 10–15 business days for a reply.
User: My deadline is tomorrow.
Helpdesk: Perhaps you should plan your schedule better next time.
User: …

* * *

Helpdesk: For future reference, we recommend writing down your password on a sticky note and attaching it to your monitor. This is both convenient and fully compliant with our cybersecurity guidelines (see Appendix IX-B).

Designed for someone else

The platform was not designed for you or your colleagues. It was not designed for any human being. It was built, decades ago, for the peculiar needs of one particular client — rumoured to have been an oil-funded laboratory specializing in transgenic hamsters.

Since then, it has been "generalized" for use by everyone. Which means, of course, that it fits no one.

[Sample Mandatory Questions]

- "Specify your plan for involving prison populations in nuclear medicine."
- "Attach notarized scans of participant signed consent forms. Note: oral consent is not accepted, even if you think it is ethically justified — physical proof is non-negotiable."
- "Provide your anticipated annual travel budget with international conversions as of today. Note: you will only be reimbursed based on today's conversion rate."
- "No, you cannot be reimbursed for purchasing carbon credits to off-set your travel expenses, even if you promise to hug a tree every morning at 6 a.m. while chanting your institution's mission statement. Please see Section 42-B of the Travel Sustainability Manual."
- "Upload a PDF of your most recent staff meeting agenda, even if it was canceled due to an interdepartmental email firestorm."
- "Enter the exact longitude and latitude of your office plant to verify it is non-toxic and ethically sourced."
- "Confirm that your lab fridge does not contain any items older than the platform itself, and provide receipts for all remaining snacks."
- "Select all the ways your project complies with regulations that no longer exist, then explain why your compliance is nonetheless retroactively relevant."
- "If you are using a password that has ever been typed incorrectly, please submit a notarized affidavit swearing that it was a human error and not an act of rebellion."

Reminder: All answers must be submitted in triplicate, cross-referenced against the 1997 edition of the University Style Guide, and approved by Sharon.

All fields are mandatory.

The philosophy of distrust

Here lies the heart of it: the platform is not about supporting research. It is about containing research.

The underlying philosophy is one of suspicion. Every form, every box, every demand is premised on the assumption that you are a grifter looking to siphon public funds into a Cayman Islands shell company that breeds radioactive chimpanzees for illicit research, and possibly military applications.

The platform is a vast documentation machine. It does not trust your good faith. It does not even believe in good faith. What it believes in is paperwork: the steady accumulation of words, signatures, scanned PDFs, and "evidence of evidence."

If accountability is good, then infinite accountability must be divine.

The expanding universe of justifications

The documentation grows, hydra-like. Cut off one requirement, and two more sprout in its place.

- **Budget justification:** Explain why your $300 line item for photocopying is not fraudulent. Provide a detailed cost-benefit analysis of every sheet, including paper type, ink brand, and estimated carbon footprint. Upload scanned receipts for all post-it notes purchased in the past five years.
- **Method justification:** Explain why you are not endangering non-existent songbirds, and how you are integrating sex and gender considerations into your analysis. Additionally, describe how you would handle an unexpected appearance of migratory unicorns, supported by an annotated bibliography, showing that each hypothetical bird or unicorn species would be ethically sourced.
- **Timeline justification:** Explain why your 3-year project cannot, in fact, be completed in 18 minutes. Include Gantt charts, contingency plans for rogue coffee machines, emergency protocols for unexpected bureaucratic email storms, and a secondary timeline demonstrating how delays caused by missing receipts were mitigated.
- **Personnel justification:** Explain why each team member is assigned to tasks that match their credentials, even if their credentials have expired, been fabricated, or belong to a different person. Include scanned copies of diplomas, résumés, LinkedIn screenshots, and childhood report cards.
- **Technology justification:** Explain why the software, computers, and lab equipment you are using are not secretly plotting against you. Upload screenshots showing version numbers, error logs, and a notarized statement confirming that no AI has gained sentience in the past three months.
- **Ethical justification:** Explain why your experiment does not violate protocols that were abandoned in 1997, and why it might still, in some abstract sense, adhere to the spirit of the Helsinki Declaration. Include three letters from anonymous reviewers confirming that, in their opinion, you are "probably ethical."

By year two, you are drowning in layers of self-referential accountability, like a never-ending IKEA instruction manual with missing pieces and instructions in Swedish, but with more pop-up warnings and error messages. Every justification spawns another, like a bureaucratic fractal, each one requiring documentation of the documentation of the documentation. You begin to suspect that the entire system exists to measure your patience rather than your project.

Eventually, you find yourself justifying your justifications. You submit a justification for why you believe your photocopy receipts are truthful, a separate justification for why that justification is truthful, and a final justification asserting the truthfulness of the first two justifications combined. You pause to marvel at how it has become less about research and more about proof of compliance to an unknowable entity named "Sharon."

[Researcher's Diary, Day 14]

- Spent 4 hours today trying to upload my CV. The system only accepts Adobe-generated PDFs, but from a deprecated version not available since 2010.
- Finally submitted. The system responded: *"File corrupt. Please fax instead."* Don't have a fax, nor any idea where to find one.
- Beginning to wonder if I am still a person or simply a file format waiting to be deprecated.

Institutional complicity

Why does this nightmare persist? Because institutions love it.

For administrators, the platform is a miracle. It generates endless spreadsheets, pie charts, and audit trails. It justifies new personnel hires to manage an ever-increasing administrative load, and this then justifies hiring more senior managers and administrators to oversee all this administration.

It manufactures the comforting illusion of order, accountability, and transparency, dazzles external funders with the appearance of institutional integrity, and keeps internal lawyers smugly content that every imaginable risk has been buried under mountains of paperwork.

And if researchers complain? That's proof the system works. Genuine accountability, after all, should hurt.

[Administrator Dashboard Preview]

- *Pie chart 1:* "Percentage of researchers who submitted incorrect versions of the same form." (Answer: 94%)
- *Pie chart 2:* "Time spent documenting time spent documenting." (Average: 68 hours)
- *Pie chart 3:* "Number of applications pending Sharon." (All of them)

The bigger picture

This isn't just about clunky web design. It's about the transformation of research culture. What was once a system built on trust in scholars, institutions, and the value of knowledge is now a system built on distrust. Every checkbox is a reminder that the institution assumes that you're guilty until proven otherwise.

And so you spend more time filling in forms than doing the work the forms are supposed to regulate. You become less a researcher and more a bureaucratic performance artist.

Eventually, you learn to accept it. You begin to take pride in your fabricated answers to irrelevant questions. You discover a grim satisfaction in uploading the same PDF three times in three different tabs. You look forward to Sharon's mysterious validation.

And when the system finally tells you, weeks later, that your application has been "conditionally approved," you feel something like joy.

All it required was your sanity, your time, and the small part of your soul.

[Final System Message]
Congratulations, your application has been **conditionally approved**.

Please return in 14 business days with:

- A notarized summary of your summary.
- Proof that no radioactive chimpanzees have been harmed.
- Evidence that migratory unicorns were properly consulted and compensated.
- A signed affidavit confirming that your remaining free time this decade has been duly accounted for.

Your session has expired.

Internal Communication

From: Vice-Dean for Strategic Coherence

Subject: Clarification regarding roles, expectations, and related ambiguities

Dear Colleagues,

Following recent feedback indicating uncertainty around roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authority, this message is intended to clarify that such uncertainty is both anticipated and, in many respects, functional.

Academic roles are designed to be flexible, evolving, and context-sensitive. While formal job descriptions exist, they should be interpreted as indicative rather than exhaustive. Initiative is encouraged, provided it aligns with institutional priorities, employs approved institutional language, is appropriately documented, and has received the necessary informal endorsements.

Please note that declining certain responsibilities may be perceived as a lack of collegiality, while accepting too many may raise concerns about boundaries. Striking the appropriate balance is an individual responsibility, to be exercised with care.

Further guidance will be forthcoming following consultation with the relevant stakeholders.

Thank you for your continued engagement.

Kind regards,

The Vice-Dean

Part II — The People

Roles, types, and recurring figures

The figures who populate academic life are rarely accidental. They emerge from the incentives, constraints, and expectations produced by institutional design.

Institutions are often described as impersonal systems, but they are enacted daily by people occupying recognisable roles. This section turns to those figures — not as individuals, but as institutional types shaped by incentives, expectations, and survival strategies.

The chapters in this part examine how academic cultures reward certain dispositions while discouraging others. Expertise is performed, collaboration is negotiated, and responsibility is selectively embraced or avoided. Some figures flourish by mastering institutional logics; others are quietly worn down by them. None operate entirely outside the structures that define their possibilities.

These portraits are not meant as caricatures of colleagues, but as reflections of roles that institutions repeatedly generate. The question is not who these people are, but why these figures recur so reliably — and what that reveals about the systems that produce them.

7. Self-Centred Colleagues

Because teamwork is overrated

Author's note
This chapter uses the format of a fictional academic job posting to satirize institutional reward structures that privilege individual prestige over collective responsibility. By exaggerating familiar criteria — productivity, visibility, strategic disengagement — it highlights how certain behaviours are not merely tolerated but structurally incentivized. The target is not any one colleague, but the systems that allow self-centred excellence to flourish while labelling collaboration as optional labour.

Become an Assistant or Associate Professor of Self-Centred Excellence

The **Institute for Strategic Self-Interest (ISSI)** is a globally misunderstood institution dedicated to the advancement of individual academic glory. Located in the heart of downtown Ego City, ISSI is proud to be the only institute accredited by the Council for the Preservation of Prestige (CPP). Our faculty members are renowned for their ability to publish prolifically, avoid committee work, and maintain a healthy distance from students and colleagues alike. Every year, ISSI attracts more than 500 graduate students eager to learn, contribute, and engage in their own self-aggrandizement. Students benefit from exposure to high-impact research from world-leading experts, provided they don't require supervision or mentorship.

The **Department of Self-Promotion and Preventive Narcissism (DSPPN)** is home to over 30 professors who specialize in self-promotion (of their own careers), global-branding, ego-statistics, citation inflation modelling, and narcissistic performativity in academic ecosystems. The mission is to foster a stimulating research and teaching environment where individual ambition is never compromised by collective responsibility.

Your Day-to-Day Impact

As a Professor of Self-Centred Excellence, you will:

- Teach selectively courses that align with your latest grant, current research project or personal interests; you will eschew all introductory or generalist courses.
- Supervise graduate students who require minimal emotional or intellectual support, who arrive with their own funds, and who can co-author papers without asking questions.
- Develop a research program focused on topics that enhance your visibility, obtain grant funding to buy-out your limited teaching responsibilities, and publish in high-impact journals with elitist selection criteria.
- Avoid administrative duties unless they come with prestige, a title, or a performance bonus.
- Contribute to the department's reputation by accepting keynote invitations and attending international conferences in distant and scenic locations.

What You'll Need to Succeed

- A PhD in any field, as long as you can argue it's "interdisciplinary."
- A strong record of solo-authored publications and strategic co-authorships.
- Demonstrated ability to collaborate when it benefits your own career trajectory.
- Proven success in avoiding committee work while still appearing in annual reports.

- Fluency in academic, post-modern jargon and the ability to strategically deflect uncomfortable questions.

Additional Information About the Position

- Salary: Competitive, especially if you cite your H-index, negotiate aggressively, and name-drop competing offers from other institutions.
- Start date: Flexible, depending on your current international travel schedule and vacation plans.
- Location: Ego City campus, though remote work is encouraged to avoid unpleasant hallway conversations.
- You may be considered for the **IVANITY Chair in Academic Branding**, which includes enhanced startup conditions and a personal social media strategist.

Application Process

Please submit the following:

- A letter of motivation, preferably written by your research assistant, explaining how your work is exceptional and why you've deigned to apply for the position.
- An academic CV highlighting awards, grants, prestigious conference invitations and any committee work you successfully avoided.
- Three recent publications that showcase your ability to write in an elitist and inaccessible language, and where you are lead or corresponding author while exploiting junior collaborators.
- A one-page statement on your teaching philosophy, focused on how you talk and students listen (but never question).
- A summary of your approach to supervision, especially if it is modelled on that of gurus.
- A research plan emphasizing the exceptional uniqueness of your work, and that includes buzzwords like "transformative," "disruptive," "synergistic," and "AI-enhanced."
- Contact details of three referees with whom you've worked closely and who owe you favours, who will confirm your brilliance while overlooking your teamwork deficits.

Contact Person

Dr. Narcisse Égoïsme
Director, DSPPN
vanity@issi.edu

Diversity and Inclusion

At ISSI, we are committed to a broad and inclusive definition of diversity that celebrates the full spectrum of academic self-interest. We welcome applications from individuals of all backgrounds, provided they can demonstrate a strong commitment to their own advancement.

We particularly encourage applications from:

- Those who identify as "too brilliant for committees"
- Scholars who have been historically excluded from teamwork
- Individuals with a proven record of avoiding emotional labour
- Applicants who have never attended a faculty meeting, have strong opinions about matters for they are uninformed, and demand their right to vote in all departmental decisions

Our **Equal Access to Prestige Program (EAPP)** ensures that all candidates —regardless of their ability to collaborate — have an equal opportunity to shine.

Confidentiality is respected throughout the hiring process, especially for applicants who prefer not to be associated with collective governance until tenure is secured.

8. The Know It All

When expertise becomes entitlement

One of the more frustrating aspects of academic life is the tendency of some colleagues to venture well outside their areas of expertise and opine on topics about which they know very little, if anything. This habit is not just annoying but professionally irresponsible and profoundly disrespectful towards those colleagues (that is, most of us) who are actually experts. And yet it happens constantly — in faculty meetings, at conferences, on media panels — where opinions are delivered with that peculiar brand of confidence usually reserved for cult leaders, TED Talk evangelists, and self-anointed LinkedIn "thought leaders."

There's a particular breed of academic who, armed with a PhD and an inflated sense of superiority, seems to believe that they know everything about anything. They speak with authority on subjects they've never studied, publish commentaries on topics they've never researched, and dominate conversations with an impressive self-assurance that is dislocated from any actual knowledge or nuance. "I read half a Wikipedia article on quantum mechanics last night — I'll be submitting a grant proposal in the morning."

These colleagues are "Know It Alls" who confuse academic credentials with omniscience and mistake genuine expertise for a license to pronounce on all things. Their real research program lies in the performative arts of certainty.

The limits of expertise

What's striking about this type of uninformed arrogance is that being a university professor and expert in one's field should come with humility, a word that, for some, appears to have been redacted from their academic lexicon. To become academics, we trained to ask questions, test hypotheses, read widely, acknowledge uncertainty, and recognize the limits of our knowledge. The deeper we go into a subject, the more we realize how little we know. It's a humbling process, unless of course you're impervious to humility.

Being an expert means recognizing when you've reached the edge of what you know, and where someone else's expertise begins. That's the intellectual posture of someone who's genuinely advancing knowledge. They know what they know and what they don't — and they behave accordingly.

But for some, the opposite holds true: the more senior they become, the more they feel entitled to pontificate on any subject under the sun. Interdisciplinary meetings become their natural habitat, a fertile ground for sweeping generalizations, half-digested ideas, and misplaced authority. You can spot them easily: they begin every sentence with "As someone who's published extensively…" followed by a statement that's demonstrably false.

Take bioethics, for example. It's a field at the intersection of philosophy, the social sciences, and the health sciences, among others. Rich, nuanced, and interdisciplinary, it's perpetually misunderstood and frequently the subject of sweeping, usually critical, generalizations: "Bioethics is just a fancy way of saying do good and don't be evil." "Ethics? That's just common sense, no need for a whole discipline."

As if a vibrant and dynamic domain could be reduced to a moral fortune cookie.

Yet misunderstanding alone isn't the problem. Equally troubling is the overconfidence with which some claim bioethical authority. Health professionals, philosophers, and social scientists

alike often assume that a brief exposure or a related background instantly confers expertise: "Bioethics is basically derived from philosophy, so as a philosopher I can do bioethics." "I took a medical ethics workshop once — same thing, right?" "I've submitted research projects for ethics review, so I'm an expert in research ethics."

My training in philosophy, anthropology, and health law does not make me a philosopher, anthropologist, or legal scholar. The corollary is also true. Alas, this subtlety is often lost on those who believe that reading a few papers constitutes cross-disciplinary fluency.

Similarly, I've seen colleagues with zero background in Indigenous studies confidently weigh in on centuries of complex cultural and historical issues, as if their PhD magically conferred ancestral wisdom. "I have a generic land acknowledgement in my email signature. That's basically praxis." "I gave a guest lecture on Indigenous issues once — been decolonizing ever since." "My heart's in the right place, so that counts as Indigenous consultation, right?"

My wife, an anthropologist with over 30 years of experience working with Indigenous communities, has endured these monologues countless times — cycling through disbelief, disgust, and the five stages of academic grief. It's remarkable how effortlessly some colleagues mistake good intentions, a handful of superficial encounters, and a touch of virtue-signalling for "deep understanding." Honestly, if that counted as expertise, we'd need a separate wing in the university just to house all the self-proclaimed authorities handing out advice like candy.

The performance of knowing

Part of the problem is that academia rewards performance. The ability to sound right is more lucrative than the ability to be right. Confidence is mistaken for competence. Those who hesitate or qualify their statements — in other words, those who are actually thoughtful — are seen as weak.

This creates a perverse incentive structure. The Know It All thrives not because they're right, but because they sound right. They use rhetorical swagger and institutional status to claim moral authority, even when their arguments are as thin as a CV padded with "forthcoming" articles. "As I once wrote in a paper I never published but often reference (see: Me, unpublished)."

Many of them eventually write books on subjects in which they have no real expertise — sweeping manifestos or pop-academic tomes that sound authoritative precisely because they aren't bogged down by an attention to detail or analytic rigour. And because they're often excellent at self-promotion, these books are treated as proof of brilliance rather than evidence of cluelessness. These professors are invited to festivals, praised as "public intellectuals," and occasionally awarded prizes for their eloquent misunderstanding of complex topics. "I'm not a climatologist, but I just published *The Climate Crisis Explained in 100 Easy Tweets* — and I've been invited to give a keynote at the next COP forum." "I didn't work in anthropology, but my bestseller *Sapiens for the 21st-Century Soul* proves I understand all human societies — and it won the 'Most Insightful Pop-Science Book' award!"

It's astonishing how effortlessly a few pages of self-published certainty, a flashy cover, and a knack for self-promotion can transform someone into a public intellectual of mark.

Because they're often charismatic and well-established in their careers, their opinions spread faster than misinformation at a wellness retreat. They speak because they can, not because they should — which, coincidentally, is also the unofficial motto of academic social media. The problem is especially dangerous in public discourse: when academics comment on everything

from vaccine policy to international relations without the requisite expertise, they contribute to misinformation and erode public trust. The public, hearing confident nonsense, reasonably assumes that all experts are like this. They're not. But the damage is done.

The Know It All, of course, will not see it that way. If called out, they'll double down, accusing others of "disciplinary silos" or "gatekeeping." They'll insist that "everyone's entitled to an opinion," as if opinion and expertise were perfectly interchangeable currencies. And when all else fails, they'll retreat to that timeless refuge of academic self-delusion: claiming "interdisciplinary synthesis" while subtly suggesting the rest of us are just too narrow-minded to keep up.

Humility as a scholarly virtue

What's needed is a return to humility. Not the performative kind that ends with "but" — the real thing, the kind that allows us to recognize limits, to listen, and to learn. Humility fosters collaboration, respect, and intellectual honesty. It's also free and looks great on everyone.

Being a scholar means being curious, not omniscient. It means asking questions, not issuing decrees. It means knowing when to speak and when to shut up — a skill that should be taught in every graduate program.

And yes, humility can be uncomfortable. It requires admitting that others know more than you, sometimes even a lot more. But it's also liberating, because it reduces the responsibility to always be expert. "You're a professor, surely you know the answer?" [to a question in a field you've never studied]. "Nope, but I *do* have a TED talk on it!"

It also allows for intellectual companionship instead of competition, for dialogue instead of diatribe. "I admit I don't understand your methodology, but here's a 15-slide PowerPoint explaining why it's all wrong." "I haven't touched neuroscience, but I *have* watched *Inception* twice, so my brain theory is solid — let me explain it to you over coffee."

This humility is especially crucial in academia, where no one person can know everything. Respecting boundaries, deferring to colleagues, and accepting correction — these are virtues, not character flaws. And the best collaborations emerge from mutual recognition, not mutual interruption. "I could be mistaken, but here's a social media thread explaining why you are definitely wrong."

Expertise gives us confidence; humility keeps it from curdling into certainty. And unlike the self-proclaimed polymathy, humility doesn't need a book deal or a trending hashtag.

Final reflections

The Know It All is a familiar figure in academic life. Brilliant, sometimes well-meaning, always exhausting. Their confidence is rarely matched by their competence, and their presence can stifle the curiosity that scholarship depends on. "I may not know what I'm talking about, but I'll say it loudly and with conviction."

We all have blind spots; we all have areas where we're not experts. Acknowledging this is not failure, it's integrity. It's what allows us to grow, collaborate, and learn something new and hopefully advance knowledge. So let's resist the temptation to opine on everything. Instead, let's cultivate humility, listen more, and remember that knowing a lot about one thing does not make us experts in everything else. Because in the end, the goal isn't to be right about everything, it's to be wrong more slowly and with better footnotes. Or, to put it in academic terms: *further research is needed.*

9. **The Arrogant Professor**

Don't be confused with one of these unpleasant colleagues

The meritocratic nature of academia lends itself to being an environment full of people with strong personalities. In our hiring practices, we select "the best" and that means people who're capable of "selling themselves", of showing through their CVs and their communication that they are the best. A result is that academics can take up a lot of space and appear to be arrogant even when that is not their intention.

As I reflected on previously regarding the metaphors that we use to describe academics, some colleagues may be individualistic, and not team players; but in my experience, many if not most, while personally invested in their careers, do so in collaboration with their colleagues and students and not at the expense of those with whom they work. Unfortunately, some professors are arrogant, full of their own sense of superiority, and convinced of the evident correctness of their viewpoints. They can be obnoxious colleagues, and their self-righteousness and arrogance is suffocating – they take up an inordinate amount of space and leave little room for others to express themselves.

For those of us who are extroverts, but who also genuinely care about the well-being of our colleagues and students, it can be a hard line to trace between acting with conviction and appearing to be arrogant.

I know that I'm someone with a strong personality and who talks a lot. I have a slew of ideas bouncing around in my head, but because I'm aphantasic, these ideas only take concrete form when I talk or write. For me, communication is not just a means of exchanging information, it is a veritable psychological need and something that gives me enormous pleasure. This is almost certainly why I was horrible at silent meditation – not thinking or talking requires an act of will power that can feel like a form of personal violence!

It's not surprising, then, that I found my place in academia, a world where developing and exchanging ideas, orally and in written form, makes up a large part of our daily activities and is a core aspect of our profession. As educators, as researchers, as managers, we are always communicating with others. And the way that we communicate is important.

Long conscious of the fact that I can take up a lot of space – because I have so many ideas, stories, etc. that I want to share, and I'm passionate about them! – I also understood that without both internal and external constraints, this verbosity could become insufferable and be perceived as egotistical or arrogant. During my undergraduate and graduate studies, I was introduced to clinical and social psychology, Zen Buddhism, and meditation techniques, all of which fuelled my interest in how my and other's mind(s) worked, and shaped my evolving self-awareness. My exploration of this literature taught me to be more reflexive and helped me to gain better control, but it was still insufficient – when I became excited about an idea that "I have to share because it's so cool!", I would lose awareness of those around me, that they might not share my passion for this idea, and so I could unintentionally dominate the conversation. Even if not my intention, I recognized that this behaviour was insufferable.

So, while a Masters student, I started asking – and authorizing – my friends to "Tell me to shut-up!" Many found it surprising that I was genuinely soliciting such interventions. But as I explained, this metaphorical slap in the face was an important complement to my own internal control mechanisms. Over the years, I've become much better at controlling and channelling my natural exuberance, but I still ask my colleagues to tell me to shut-up; my wife has no

hesitation in doing so, and for that I'm grateful. This request to family and colleagues is anchored in my fear of being perceived as overbearing, arrogant or boring and to then have them stop listening.

The difference between the good colleague who is a bit too exuberant, and one who is arrogant, largely has to do with intention. With arrogant colleagues, they're not fundamentally interested in helping others. Even if they support some of their students or junior colleagues in succeeding, it is usually only those who they judge to be the best and worthy of their attentions; and there is an instrumental aspect, because the successes are encouraged because they reflect positively on the colleague. In my experience, the arrogant colleague is fundamentally self-interested.

When I think of examples of such colleagues that I've known over the years, their arrogance often seemed to be a manifestation of a narcissistic personality and/or an inferiority complex: they cared only about themselves, were convinced of their own importance and that they merited (and needed) recognition in the form of adulation, promotions, awards, etc.

These are the colleagues who ask questions of conference presenters, or of students in a seminar or thesis defence, that are not questions but instead 10-minute-long rambling commentaries that leave the recipient scratching their head trying to find a question to answer. The purpose is simply to grand-stand. Frequently, they also build a coterie of students, their disciples, who are part of the select-few granted entrance to the inner sanctum; and these students are made to understand their privilege (which they will then lord over other students), and in exchange they hero-worship the guru. This may sound like a caricature from a bad film, but I've known colleagues who behaved in exactly this way. What's more, some of them were convinced that they were unrecognised "geniuses" and therefore suffered from a lack of recognition; they had not received awards and were mortified.

Different but related are those whose arrogance is a way to compensate for an inferiority complex, a never-overcome imposter syndrome. These colleagues have an insatiable hunger for attention and appear to be trying to fill an emotional void. "My latest book was published with Prestigious Publishing Press" or "I just got this huge, highly competitive grant" or "My H-factor is huge!" or "I've made this unique discovery and I'm submitting the paper to Nature" or "I've been to various exotic countries and was invited to exclusive dinners" or "I just received another prize" or "I've been nominated to this high-level advisory committee".

Each of these affirmations, if coming from an exuberant and well-intentioned colleague, would probably also be followed by a discussion about how to mobilize these experiences to help their colleagues or students, to share lessons learned, and to capitalize on opportunities for the benefit of others. But from arrogant colleagues, these statements simply manifest their need to have their egos stroked – they are never aimed at helping others.

Intentions are important, but so too are other behaviours that transparently demonstrate one's underlying good intentions. The lesson I learned over the years is to assume my exuberance, because it is who I am, but to moderate my enthusiasm, to listen and to give space to others – in so doing, I show that I'm not arrogant.

10. Strong Personalities

Academia is not for the faint of heart

Author's note
This chapter approaches "strong personality" not as a personal trait to be cultivated, but as an institutional requirement produced by the conditions of academic work. Through the form of a satirical self-assessment, it highlights the domains of academic life in which resilience, confidence, and emotional insulation are treated as prerequisites rather than consequences of constant scrutiny. The aim is not to evaluate individuals, but to make visible the expectations placed on those who operate within systems where critique is routine, stakes are high, and support is uneven.

The Strong Personality™ Quiz

So you think you want to be an academic? Great! Do you enjoy public humiliation, 80-hour work weeks (even though you're paid for 40), being regularly told that the competition is fierce (it is)? Do you perpetually feel that you're not good enough (imposter syndrome is endemic)?

Welcome to a world where every interaction is a test of wills, where conflicts are always in the making, where the slightest hesitation will be seen as a sign of weakness and an opening for attack. Welcome to the Academic Hunger Games.

Before you stride into this gladiatorial arena armed with your freshly-minted PhD and an outdated laptop, take this quiz to see if you have the necessary **Strong Personality™** to survive in academia. Warning: results may be traumatizing.

Question 1: The Classroom Showdown

You're teaching your first lecture. A male student in the front row leans back, smirks, and says, "I just don't see it that way", and then launches into a 5-minute critique of your presentation. Do you:

- **A.** Attempt a rational dialogue (occasionally, this works).
- **B.** Smile sweetly, thank him for his "insight," and mentally start preparing a digital voodoo doll (the student portfolio provides rich material).
- **C.** Beam at him, say "Excellent contribution," then continue with your lecture as if his comment was the opening premise for your next slide.
- **D.** Lock eyes and methodically dismantle his argument, point by point, citing your PhD thesis, 10 peer-reviewed articles and 3 books that he and the class must absolutely read to understand why he's wrong and you're right. With a passive-aggressive smile, you conclude: "And this material will definitely be on the exam."

Question 2: Reviewer #2

Your manuscript is returned with positive comments from the much-loved Reviewer #1, and a scathing critique from the hated Reviewer #2, who concluded that "This work is incoherent and reads like it was written by a drunk raccoon." Do you:

- **A.** Cry on your keyboard until your computer short-circuits and resign yourself to never being able to publish this paper… or any other.

- **B.** Resubmit the exact same paper to another journal, hoping that they don't also send it to Reviewer #2.
- **C.** Integrate all of Reviewer #1's excellent comments and effusively thank the editors for having provided you with this amazingly constructive review. With humility, carefully respond to Reviewer #2's comments, incorporating what improves the paper and diplomatically setting aside what does not.
- **D.** In your Response to reviewers letter (which is longer than your article), provide a point-by-point rebuttal to each of Reviewer #2's comments, demonstrating that they're completely unjustified, supported by references to literature and quotations from leading experts in the field. You make it clear that Reviewer #2 was incompetent to evaluate your paper and the editor negligent in their selection of reviewers.

Question 3: The Promotion Gauntlet

While reviewing your draft promotion dossier, the department director remarks, "This is solid, but it's not quite at the level of Professor McLoudVoice." Do you:

- **A.** Nod politely, then quietly rework your dossier to highlight your "collaborative humility" and "barista-level adaptability."
- **B.** Revise your cover letter to include 20 carefully curated self-citations as a gentle reminder of your scholarly impact and update your CV with a new section titled "Selected Contributions", featuring a few bolded metrics and italicized accolades — just enough to suggest excellence without triggering envy.
- **C.** Reply: "If we're measuring resonance, my lectures have inspired three thesis topics and one departmental existential crisis." Casually reference the effusive student feedback (and regular standing ovations) received in the end of term course evaluations. Note the hallway debates that lasted longer than some meetings and influenced faculty policy.
- **D.** Take a deep breath, close your laptop, and say, "Let's revisit the criteria, because strong personalities don't fit into weak metrics." You then propose a revised evaluation framework that includes intellectual courage, institutional critique, and the ability to survive three restructurings without losing your soul.

Question 4: Grant Rejections

Your grant proposal has been rejected for the third time. The committee called it "important but unfundable," which is the academic equivalent of "it's not you, it's me." Do you:

- **A.** Start a GoFundMe titled Please Support My Project — and swallow what little remained of your dignity.
- **B.** Add more jargon until your proposal is 98% adjectives, 2% science.
- **C.** Submit the exact same grant to five different funding competitions with slightly different formatting to test whether reviewers prefer clarity over complexity. Track which version gets the most praise, then publish a meta-analysis critiquing reviewer bias and pointing to the broader problems with research funding.
- **D.** Take a deep breath, pour a glass of something celebratory, and say, "Rejection is just peer-reviewed motivation." You then ask an AI tool to rewrite the proposal in a tone that reviewers might actually understand — less visionary, more fundable. The new version includes a section titled "*Why This Matters, Even If You Don't Get It Yet*", and you submit it with a smile that says, "I'll see you in the acknowledgements."

Question 5: Faculty Meetings

Your colleague repeats your idea, louder, and everyone nods. Do you:

- **A.** Pretend to need to respond to an urgent message, just to get out of the room.
- **B.** Interrupt with "Yes, as I just said verbatim," and then sulk through the rest of the meeting.
- **C.** Casually open your laptop, generate a transcript of the meeting using an AI tool, highlighting both comments, and then email to your colleague with the subject line "Just for clarity, I thought this moment might interest you" and later debrief with a colleague over coffee.
- **D.** Start slow clapping while smiling sarcastically and whispering "bravo", until the director intervenes. You then propose a workshop on "Academic Ventriloquism: How to Speak Without Attribution."

Question 6: Course Evaluations

In the end-of-term course evaluations, a student writes "She smiles too much to be credible," another that you're "Not approachable enough," while a third suggests that "Class would be better with snacks." Do you:

- **A.** Sigh, save the evaluations to your computer and never look at them again until your renewal or promotion application requires you to submit these… and then relive the trauma.
- **B.** Use them as content in your next lecture under the title "How to Spot Bias in Data." Add a chart correlating "professor smile frequency" with "student exam performance." The class discussion is surprisingly thoughtful.
- **C.** Turn the comments into a mock peer-review: project them in class, annotate in red with a word-by-word analysis of implicit gender bias, and then assign the class a reading list in feminist pedagogy. Conclude with: "Revise and resubmit your comments — anonymously, of course."
- **D.** Embrace the chaos, print these comments on a T-shirt, and wear it proudly to your next lecture, opening your class with "Welcome to the data." When someone questions your credibility, you point to the shirt and say, "Already peer-reviewed. Any further questions?"

Question 7: Public Engagement

A journalist misquotes you, saying that your research proves "yoga cures malaria." Do you:

- **A.** Draft a furious correction letter and email it to the editor, who responds with an auto-reply: "Thank you for your feedback."
- **B.** Fire off a sarcastic social media post — "No, yoga doesn't cure malaria, unless you're extremely flexible and also a mosquito" — and rant about the shoddy state of contemporary journalism and the challenge of doing good knowledge transfer. Within minutes your department chair replies: "Maybe delete?"
- **C.** Pretend you did discover it and apply for a multi-million-dollar wellness grant. Your proposal compares Hot Yoga to mosquito nets in a randomized trial, and you brand yourself as both healer and researcher — the improbable offspring of a global health expert and a lifestyle guru.

- **D.** Skip the defensive scramble to fight bad journalism, you lean into and own the misquote by launching a global campaign called "Malaria? Namaste." You sell mosquito-repellent incense and other merch, release a mindfulness app that pings whenever a mosquito is nearby, and give a TED talk with the opening line: "The cure was inside your chakras all along."

Question 8: Conferences

You've been accepted to present at a major international conference. Your slot is 8am Sunday, in a small hard-to-find breakout room, competing with the "Free Coffee & Croissants Networking Session" in the main room. Do you:

- **A.** Read your talk as quickly as possible, avoiding eye contact with the three people who showed up, two of whom are lost — but one of whom asks an excellent question. Flee the room, praying there are still croissants left.
- **B.** Pretend this tiny turnout was intentional: rebrand it as an "intimate seminar" and thank the audience for their "exclusive participation." When one person claps out of pity, you internalize it as "evidence of strong and meaningful audience engagement."
- **C.** Channel your inner show person: crank up the animations, drop in a meme or two, and end with a dramatic mic-drop line like "So, in conclusion: statistics are sexy." Later, you overhear someone in the hallway say, "I think I actually stayed awake for most of the presentation."
- **D.** Flip the script entirely. You live-stream your talk on social media, title it "Breakfast with a Bang," and rack up more views than the conference keynote. The official conference hashtag starts trending with your name, and suddenly the organizers are asking if you'd like to chair next year's key plenary session.

Question 9: Failed Experiments

Your research collapses in flames — literally. Do you:

- **A.** Pretend it was a planned demonstration for your colleagues. Nod seriously as everyone peers through the smoke and scorched equipment, muttering: "Ah yes… a valuable lesson in what not to do."
- **B.** Report your findings in an article, calling it a "negative case study" that resulted in important "methodological innovations." Include a vague figure explaining "unexpected results" that generate "critical insights". Conclude the paper noting that failure is just part of the scientific process. Repeat this mantra until you believe it — and then, eventually, you do.
- **C.** Reframe it as an "interdisciplinary art installation." Post videos online of the experiment gone wrong, add a dramatic soundtrack, and call it "Entropy in Action." Invite your followers to comment on the beauty of scientific chaos.
- **D.** Monetize the disaster: sell tickets to a virtual "Spectacle of Scientific Failure," host an in-person immersive experience for a select group, titled the "*Great Experiment Meltdown*," and pitch sponsorships to fire extinguisher companies. Bonus points if the remnants of your experiment become highly sought after limited-edition art prints and collector's memorabilia.

Question 10: The Dean Emails You at Midnight

Subject line: "Quick Question." Do you:

- **A.** Reply instantly, sacrificing your last shred of work-life balance. Type, send, then stare at the screen wondering why you're still awake and working.
- **B.** Pretend you never saw it. Denial is a river in academia, and you've just built a dam. Sleep peacefully until the next "urgent" ping.
- **C.** Draft a detailed, professional reply that anticipates follow-up questions and provides context. Reread it multiple times to make sure the tone is courteous but not over-eager, then schedule it to send first thing in the morning, because "quick" doesn't have to mean midnight panic.
- **D.** Savour your sleep and reply with a clear, composed message. Title it: "Work-life balance is greater than midnight panic." Bonus: attach a calming image of someone sipping tea while watching the sunrise, reminding everyone (including yourself) that life exists beyond the inbox.

Results

Mostly A's: The Marshmallow
Soft, yes. But also flexible. You absorb shock, you bend, and occasionally you surprise everyone by not burning at all. Academia might chew you up — or you might build a community of students who remember you long after the Titans retire.

Mostly B's: The Grinder
You will survive out of sheer willpower and caffeine. You will mutter in hallways. You will draft emails you never send. You will develop a refined eyebrow raise that communicates entire dissertations. Strangely, this may be enough.

Mostly C's: The Operator
You understand that academia is theatre. You know when to nod, when to cite, and when to let Reviewer #2 think they won. You may not lose your soul — you may simply learn how to store it safely off-site.

Mostly D's: The Titan
Impressive. Intimidating. Slightly exhausting. You will be asked to chair things. Many things. You will learn that indestructibility is overrated, and that even Titans eventually Google "how to set boundaries with a dean."

Mostly "None of the Above"
Congratulations. You've realized that this quiz is rigged. Academia doesn't actually reward one personality type. It rewards adaptability, alliances, and the occasional strategic disappearance. Strong personalities are less about dominance and more about restraint, judgment, and durability.

Postscript

Satire aside — and satire is of course very much intended — the secret is not becoming a Titan. It's recognizing that the Strong Personality™ is partly myth, partly armour, and partly performance. Academia can be combative. It often rewards volume instead of substance and promotes extreme confidence while devaluing the care of students and colleagues. But academia also contains pockets of generosity, collaboration, and unexpected solidarity. Those

spaces rarely make it into the gladiator narrative, but they're also the ones that survive the spectacle.

In practice, the people who last in academia are not always the loudest nor are they the toughest. Instead, they're the ones who learn when to engage and invest in demanding projects, when to disengage or cut their losses, and when to simply laugh at the silliness of the situation. These are the people who build coalitions. They share the heartwarming student evaluation they received, not to gloat, but to lift everyone's morale. And they forward each other Reviewer #2 horror stories with the subject line: "You too?", because "misery loves company" — and because shared absurdity is easier to bear.

Resilience in academia is thus much less about crushing opponents and more about refusing to internalize the absurdity of administrative structures. It's knowing that a failed grant is not a moral verdict, that a snarky evaluation says more about the person who wrote it than about your worth, and that the dean's midnight email can, in fact, wait until morning.

Strong personality? Maybe.

Strong boundaries. Strong alliances. Strong sense of humor. Much better.

And if, after all this, the artisanal bakery still sounds appealing, well then, that's a legitimate mental health break. Academia will still be here on Monday; the croissants, on the other hand, will not.

11. Expert for Hire

Academic consulting: part scholarship, part survival, all plausible deniability

Author's note
In the margins of academic life — somewhere between grading papers, enduring endless committee work, and pretending to understand financial spreadsheets — I've occasionally been asked to help professionals or community organizations untangle ethical messes. Not for fame or fortune, though a little honorarium never hurts, these consulting gigs have taken me into hospitals, boardrooms, and even an administrative court. They've all been fascinating experiences, sometimes frustrating, and surprisingly meaningful.

What follows is a series of fictionalised case files of an academic "gun for hire" inspired by these real-world engagements. They're satirical, but they're also grounded in the kinds of situations in which academic consultants are increasingly involved. Consider this a peek behind the curtain of the "expert-for-hire" economy, where scholarly insight meets institutional interests.

Case files from the ethics underground

Declassified excerpts from the personal log of an academic consultant, known in certain circles as "The Ethicist."

They don't call until it's already gone wrong, when something burns — not buildings, but reputations.

A research team under fire, a professional association under review, a hospital team in quiet panic. Somewhere in the middle of the night, an administrator stares at a press release and mutters the four words that keep people like me employed: "We need an ethicist."

This is the life of the academic consultant — the scholar-for-hire, the person you call when you want your moral chaos formatted in twelve-point font, complete with references, by someone bearing the title "Professor" and the credibility that comes with it.

I don't carry a gun; I carry citations. And I always bill by the hour.

Case File 1: The first contract

They called it a "policy scan." I called it a baptism by bureaucracy.

The client — a committee so well-meaning it bordered on fictional — needed a report on the ethical implications of genomic data use. The brief: "be objective but reassuring." Translation: "say something brave, but not career-ending."

I was still a student then, unpaid in most currencies except anxiety. Deadlines were brutal, feedback apocalyptic. Every comment from the client began with "great start, but…", the academic version of a headshot. Consulting, I learned, isn't about truth. It's about producing moral clarity that survives committee review — ethical choreography under fire.

They asked for a literature review. I gave them a literature novella. They replied, "Could you make it more actionable?" I considered adding a knife fight.

By the end, I'd delivered something polished, unthreatening, and utterly forgettable. They loved it. An intern later used it as a model for their undergraduate essay on "ethics in innovation." I failed them in spirit.

Around version twelve, I realised I'd just changed weapons mid-fight — traded integrity for invoice formatting. No gun, just a Word template and the faint smell of moral cordite. My only weapon was "Track Changes," and it drew more blood than most knives.

That was my first hit. Payment modest. Trauma manageable. Interest compounded.

Case File 2: The hospital job

Hospitals don't sleep; they hum in fluorescent insomnia.

I was brought in to "support decision-making", consultant code for walking into rooms where no one agrees who's dying, who's in charge, or who's already quit. The issues were human: end-of-life care, fractured families, cultural friction, and grief that filled the air like static.

One doctor asked if I could "ethically fast-track consent." I said, "Sure, if you can metaphysically fast-track mortality." He didn't laugh. He later asked if I could "ethically" justify his parking expenses. I referred him to Human Resources.

Early on, I relied on the classic four principles: autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice. Easy to recite, hard to wield. Eventually, I learned to switch frameworks mid-conversation, like swapping weapons — Kant and Mill when things got abstract, pragmatism when they got real.

Mostly, I just listened. People don't need theory; they need permission to feel uncertain. No slides, no applause, no citations — just the quiet relief of helping people find clarity in the mess that is human life, and death.

It's the cleanest kind of work I do. Bloodless, but never cold.

Case File 3: The fee question

Every mercenary wrestles with price — academic consultants just use longer words. My accountant calls it consulting income; I call it reparations for every unpaid committee I've ever served on.

A colleague gave me the formula: **Fee = (Their Ability to Pay) × (My Reluctance).** Elegant, honest, perfect.

If an underfunded NGO calls about responsible fundraising, I do it for free and call it moral cardio. If a government agency wants a 60-page AI ethics framework "by Thursday," I triple my reluctance and quote accordingly.

Money changes the ontology of advice. Free input is "feedback," maximum one hour, a taster for future work. Paid input is "expertise," billed at a rate comparable to doctors or lawyers. And once you've been paid, you become the "external expert", a magical status that makes your old ideas sound ten times wiser and twenty times more expensive.

I once quoted a fee so high they asked if it included organ donation. I said, "Only if you need a heart transplant for your governance model."

I've stopped apologizing for the invoice. Advice may be priceless, but my time and experience aren't. If you look cheap, you get no respect. Even John Wick gets paid up front. The difference is, he doesn't have to itemize mileage.

Case File 4: The corporate mirage

The client wanted an "Ethical Innovation Framework." The way they said it, you could hear the shareholders breathing heavily in the background, expecting a corporate social responsibility certificate.

Their research unit was "disrupting" something — no one could say what. They talked about trust, transparency, and "values alignment," which usually means that Legal found a problem, the optics are terrible, and "someone" must fix it. They said they wanted ethics to be their "competitive edge." I suggested honesty, but that was "Too disruptive." They wanted ethics that synergized, not ethics that interfered — a kind of moral tofu: flavourless, adaptable, and entirely plant-based.

I interviewed managers, staff and the executive; I consulted with key shareholders and clients. I spent weeks writing a meticulous, detailed report with a clean, evidence-based framework supported by action items and a deployment schedule. They replaced my process flowchart with stock photos of diverse people looking at laptops. One image featured a woman laughing at a spreadsheet. I still lie awake wondering if the spreadsheet had a punchline.

Next thing I knew, my report was on their website under the headline *Ethics: Our Competitive Edge.* There was no mention of procedures or examples of change in the corporate culture. Their "implementation plan" was a three-slide deck and a press release. Even John Wick would've taken out the comms department.

They paid on time, so I didn't complain. You can't always teach integrity, but you can bill for it.

Case File 5: The legal hit

Lawyers make exceptional clients: they pay promptly, speak precisely, and weaponize footnotes.

This gig involved a university arbitration — part governance, part theatre. My brief: write an expert report so balanced it could survive both a judge and a philosophy seminar, yet sharp enough to leave a mark. The lawyer asked if my report was "bulletproof." I said, "Only against philosophy majors." The lawyers laughed, which worried me — it meant they thought they were philosophers now.

In court, ethics becomes performance art. Every word is cross-examined. They ask if you're biased; you admit that everyone is. They ask if you stand by your conclusions; you say, "Within reason," and watch panic bloom. One asked if "ethical consistency" was measurable. I said only with a ruler calibrated in irony.

The case settled quietly. My report vanished into a confidential file, sealed by a non-disclosure agreement — no chance of publication. That's consulting: all brains, no credit. The closest I get to glory is the wire transfer.

Still, the money cleared, and my testimony was described as "measured yet unnerving." Exactly as intended.

Case File 6: The boundary issue
The hardest client to manage is yourself.

Every consultant knows the trap: one "quick favour" too many, one midnight email too late. You think you're being generous, but you're really feeding the beast, that hybrid of curiosity and guilt that keeps academics from ever logging off.

Red flags? I know them by heart:

- "We don't have a budget, but it's great exposure." Translation: you'll be paid in gratitude and exhaustion.
- "Our CEO is very committed to ethics." Translation: they just got caught doing something unethical and are now in their reflective era.
- "It doesn't need to be perfect." Translation: it absolutely does, and they'll blame you when it isn't.
- "We'd love to keep working with you" Translation: unpaid sequel.

I tried saying no in an email once. The client replied, "Great, so you're available?" Some nights I rehearse the word like a forbidden spell. It still sounds unprofessional. I tried whispering it into a mirror once. The mirror cracked — *self-care* by shattering illusion. Somewhere, my therapist smiled without knowing why.

Case File 7: The association job
Professional associations are where ethics goes to wear a tie.

They wanted a new code of conduct that was "inspiring but enforceable." Translation: Make us look virtuous without limiting anyone's options; no oversight required. They also wanted it to be "aspirational." I asked if they meant "fictional." They nodded. One suggested adding a preamble about "ethical excellence." I suggested therapy instead.

I learned to translate fluently:

- "Ethical concern" → "implementation challenge."
- "This is indefensible" → "further discussion may be warranted."
- "We value transparency" → "we hope no one asks questions."
- "Stakeholder engagement" → "we sent a survey no one read."

Ethics here is equal parts philosophy and tone management. The chair kept saying "we need to future-proof this," as if virtue had a firmware update.

To discuss my recommendations, we met in a hotel basement lit by flickering fluorescents. The muffins were stale, the PowerPoints worse. I briefly considered filing a complaint for professional misconduct, but realized I'd have to name myself.

The final report passed unanimously, which is consultant-speak for "no one read it carefully." Still, they shook my hand like I'd saved civilization. The treasurer even offered me a commemorative pen — which, ethically speaking, I accepted.

Case File 8: The academic gray zone
Every university claims to value outreach, right up until you ask to be paid for it.

Give a keynote? That's service. Join a government panel? Still service. Write a 30-page policy report to support institutional change? Somehow, also service. I once calculated that if I billed for "service," I'd qualify for early retirement — or at least better coffee.

Administrators adore "knowledge mobilization", as long as it's unpaid and uncontroversial. "We can't pay you, but we'll post it to LinkedIn." I asked if exposure pays rent. They said, "It pays reputation." Reputation doesn't pay rent, but apparently it buys guilt-free budget meetings.

So you adapt. Sometimes you bring the project inside for legitimacy — no pay but full control. Sometimes you keep it outside for sanity — more pay, less paperwork. Either way, someone questions your motives. If you're paid, you're mercenary; if you're not, you're naïve. I prefer "professionally conflicted."

My answer doesn't change: ethics without application is just decoration.

As Winston reminds John Wick, "You work with what you have, not what you deserve."

Case File 9: The philosophical aftermath
Every job leaves residue — files archived, conscience smudged.

Sometimes I wonder if ethics consulting is just philosophy with better snacks. Then I remember the muffins. Nothing says "professional integrity" like a dry bran muffin at 7 am. I tell myself it's worth it: the long hours, the small victories, the quiet compromises that no one sees.

Sometimes it even works. A committee listens. A patient's family breathes easier. A policy gets a little cleaner. For a moment, the world tilts slightly toward sense. Briefly. Then someone emails asking if I can do a "quick ethics check" on a 90-page report.

That's enough.

And yes, I still take new cases, but only the ones worth losing sleep over. When the call comes, I holster my frameworks, open a new document, and step back into the moral fog.

Epilogue: The Consultant's Creed
Take the job if it matters.

Price it like you respect yourself.

Write clearly enough that non-experts understand, but vaguely enough that everyone agrees.

Always deliver on time — they'll forget what you wrote, but they'll remember the deadline.

Consulting isn't a side hustle. It's an alternate universe where scholarship meets survival instinct. It demands clarity, humility, and a functioning invoice template. And when they call, you answer. Because you're the expert for hire — the scholar with no gun, just a laptop, a deadline, and a moral compass that occasionally needs recalibration.

Platform Update — Version 4.7.12

(Mandatory)

This update includes several enhancements designed to improve user experience, data integrity, and compliance with evolving reporting requirements.

What's new:

- Streamlined submission workflow (now includes two additional confirmation screens)
- Expanded character limits for mandatory narrative fields
- Automatic logout after periods of inactivity exceeding three minutes

Known issues:

- Uploaded documents may not display as uploaded
- Confirmation emails may arrive before submission is completed
- Error messages may not correspond to identifiable errors

Important notes:

- Previous submissions may require resubmission to ensure compatibility
- Saved drafts cannot be recovered once final submission is initiated
- Support documentation has been updated and may differ from system behaviour
- Users experiencing difficulties are encouraged to consult the Help section before contacting support. Support response times may vary

Thank you for your cooperation as we continue to enhance the platform.

Not all institutional roles are equally visible. Some of the most consequential labour in academic life is framed as training, assistance, or opportunity rather than as work.

12. The Castle Runs on Invisible Work

An allegorical account of graduate labour

Author's note
This chapter adopts an allegorical form to examine how academic institutions rely on the largely invisible labour of graduate students. By translating familiar supervisory and research practices into the language of fantasy, it highlights how dependency, credit allocation, and delayed recognition are normalised as training rather than acknowledged as work. The setting is fictional; the structures are not.

Arrival at The Castle

No one is born in The Castle. We arrive by letter.

"Congratulations," it reads, glowing faintly in the moonlight, "you have been accepted into the Master's Program in Magical Inquiry." The letter promises discovery, transformation, and belonging. It does not mention that it also functions as a binding spell.

Upon arrival, I was assigned a desk in the cellar of the Department of Applied Wizardry. It had once been a storage closet, judging by the smell of formaldehyde and forgotten ambition. On the door, someone had affixed a laminated sign: **Graduate Research Space**. I understood this to mean I was now a scholar in training. It took several months to learn that it actually meant *house elf with a student ID*.

I was not alone. Others arrived each year, clutching their letters, convinced they had entered a world of ideas. We were sorted into departments by arcane algorithms and the deliberations of the Sorting Committee, a body rumoured to consult budget spreadsheets, strategic plans, and planetary alignments during eclipses.

Our work was essential. We gathered data, drafted manuscripts, prepared slides, managed ethics approvals, mentored newer arrivals, and ensured that conferences ran smoothly. Much of this labour was framed as "professional development." Some of it was framed as "opportunity." Very little of it was named as work.

Life below

We met in the breakroom, a damp alcove behind an enchanted vending machine that occasionally dispensed coffee if you whispered your thesis title backwards during a full moon. Sometimes it also dispensed rejection letters from journals you hadn't submitted to — a feature known as *pre-emptive peer review*.

There we compared notes: who had been asked to rewrite a grant proposal over the weekend; who had been "invited" to organise a conference without appearing on the programme; who had been reminded that authorship would be "revisited later." We spoke in the language of endurance. Everyone believed that invisibility was temporary.

Senior wizards explained that this was apprenticeship. One learned by doing. Recognition would come later — after the defence, after the postdoc, after the next funding cycle. The system was demanding, but fair. Or at least necessary.

Professor Dumbledrake embodied this logic perfectly. He referred to me as *my student* in public and *you there* in private. When visitors came, he gestured toward my workstation with a paternal smile. "Doing marvellous work under my supervision," he would say.

I nodded, then returned to the shadows.

The proposal

The turning point arrived, as these things often do, disguised as opportunity.

A new funding call was announced: a cross-disciplinary initiative on transformative magical ethics. It would keep the laboratory funded for five years. Dumbledrake was enthusiastic.

“I’ll need a first draft by Monday,” he said.

It was Thursday. Time travel had recently been banned by the Chrono-Compliance Office due to concerns about unfair citation advantages.

By Sunday night, forty pages lay on his desk: conceptual framework, methodology, evaluation plan. My name appeared discreetly in the footer. The names of the other elves who had helped were included in the acknowledgements.

On Tuesday, Dumbledrake summoned me.

“Splendid work,” he said. “The Council has accepted my proposal.”

I glanced at the cover page.

Principal Investigator: Professor Dumbledrake

Co-Investigator: Professor McSage

Research Assistant: *(blank)*

“You’ll learn a great deal from the project,” he added kindly.

It was then that I understood the spell. Invisibility was not a side effect. It was a feature.

A disturbance in the hierarchy

Change entered The Castle quietly, wearing slightly ill-fitting robes with scandalous pockets. Lyra Halloway, a new assistant professor, had recently arrived from the northern citadels, where hierarchies were flatter and contracts reportedly included clauses permitting the word *no*.

She spoke too quickly, misplaced her wand, and — most unsettling of all — spoke directly to the elves.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

No one had ever asked that before.

She noticed the analysis on my screen. She asked questions. She listened to the answers. When she learned who had written the proposal, she frowned.

“That’s odd,” she said. “Why aren’t you listed?”

I explained the system.

She laughed, not unkindly. “Well, that seems inefficient.”

When her own project launched, she insisted that I be listed as a collaborator. The administration objected — "students cannot hold that title" — but she located a workaround: *collaborator (in training)*. It was a small thing. But my name appeared.

This disturbed the equilibrium.

Senior wizards muttered that Lyra was naïve, that she did not understand how excellence was maintained. Dumbledrake invited her to tea, the ritual of polite containment.

"Hierarchy is how we ensure quality," he explained.

"Guidance, yes," she replied. "But not servitude."

"This is academia," he said gently. "Not activism."

She gestured toward the cellar. "Tell that to the people keeping your projects alive."

For the first time, his gaze followed hers.

Partial visibility

Nothing dramatic followed. The Castle does not collapse when a spell weakens. It adjusts.

One elf asked to be listed on a committee. Another initialled data files. A third declined to organise a conference without recognition. None of this overturned the hierarchy. It merely introduced friction.

Some paid a price. Invitations dried up. Emails went unanswered. Others left entirely, seeking work beyond the walls.

The Castle absorbed these losses efficiently.

Closing the file

Invisibility in academia is rarely absolute, and visibility is rarely complete. Recognition arrives unevenly, often too late, and usually framed as generosity rather than justice.

The Castle continues to run. Proposals are written. Credits are allocated. Training is invoked. The system insists that all this is preparation for a future that remains just out of reach. What sustains it is not cruelty, but habit — and the quiet agreement to treat invisible work as a rite of passage rather than a structural feature. The Castle does not lack elves. It lacks the willingness to acknowledge that it was never run by wizards alone.

Once roles are established, they must be demonstrated. In universities, credibility is rarely asserted directly; it is performed through documents.

Part III — The Performance

Documents, slides, grants, and related forms of suffering

This section turns from who occupies institutional roles to what those roles are expected to produce. Slides, citations, grants, and letters function as evidence that work — and judgment — has occurred. These documentary outputs make academic life visible, legible, and assessable, treating writing, presenting, and applying not merely as communication, but as performances through which competence, credibility, and compliance are demonstrated.

The chapters that follow focus on how form often overtakes substance. Documents expand to signal seriousness, slides multiply to convey rigour, and applications become rituals of anticipatory rejection. Success is measured not only by outcomes, but by adherence to conventions that few believe in and everyone reproduces.

Performance, in this sense, is not deception. It is a shared understanding of what counts as work, and of how work must be displayed in order to be recognised. The costs of this arrangement are unevenly distributed, but widely normalised.

13. Death by PowerPoint

How academia learned to stop worrying and love the monotone

There are few things in life more soul-sucking than being trapped in a conference room while someone reads a wall of lime green text off a PowerPoint slide. Bonus points if they're using Times New Roman or Comic Sans. Double points if they're doing it in a monotone voice while waving a laser pointer randomly at the screen and clicking through 80 slides during a 20-minute presentation slot.

They always say they'll "skip some parts." They never do. There is no skipping. Only suffering.

Welcome to the academic conference, where knowledge goes to die.

Communication is a skill (surprise!)

Here's a wild idea: conveying your ideas clearly and engagingly should be considered a basic professional skill. Revolutionary, I know. You'd think that in academia — where research, teaching, and public engagement are our bread, butter, and occasional cocktail party hors d'oeuvres — we'd have figured out how to talk to other humans in a way that doesn't make them want to gnaw their own arm off for entertainment.

And yet, here we are. Trapped at another conference, sipping bad coffee (why does it always have to taste like caffeinated dishwater?), eyes glazed over (when we're not busy doom scrolling on our phones), trying to pretend that we're actually paying attention to a presentation on nuances in the contemporary understanding of obscure concepts that 5 people in the world care about. And the PowerPoint slides are in an 11-point pale yellow font on light blue background (so illegible) and woefully lacking in images to distract the audience.

Don't get me wrong — academic conferences can be wonderful. They're where ideas are exchanged, friendships are renewed, new collaborations are born, and students and junior scholars go to launch their careers. They are also, occasionally, the sites of genuine inspiration. But for every riveting keynote or brilliantly innovative student presentation, there are a dozen that are mind-numbing and feel like punishment for sins in a past life.

The problem is not the research. It's not the people. It's the presentation.

More precisely: it's Death by PowerPoint.

My origin story: fear and trembling

My students don't believe me when I tell them that I wasn't always a confident speaker. They see me now as a full-blown extrovert — one of those people who seem to enjoy being handed a microphone (or go without, as I've a voice that carries and I can be easily heard at the back of an auditorium) and who can talk comfortably in any context, regardless of the venue or the size of the audience.

In fact, I used to be terrified at giving public presentations, right up to the first year of my PhD. A guest lecture in a class was a source of stress, and a conference presentation was downright terrifying. My palms would be damp, and a cold sweat would drip down my spine. My knees would shake. I'd feel like I was about to be executed rather than deliver a 15-minute bioethics talk on my doctoral research.

What changed? I acted. I pretended I was someone else.

Not in the cool, immersive-method-acting way. More in the "fake it till you make it" strategy born of sheer desperation. I imagined I was a character — Confident Speaker #1 — playing the role of someone who gives academic talks without projectile sweating. The armour was psychological: if the performance went badly, it wasn't me who failed. It was the character. My real self was safe backstage, sipping metaphorical chamomile tea.

And lo and behold, it worked. Over time, I stopped being terrified. I even started enjoying it. Mostly because I realized that nobody, *nobody*, is paying as much attention to your shaky voice or cold sweat as you think they are.

They're too busy silently praying you'll be marginally better than the last speaker, that you'll wake them from the boredom induced torpor.

The greatest hits of terrible presentations

Let's be honest: we've all seen them. Some of us have been them. (Redemption is possible.) Allow me to present a few of the most common archetypes in the pantheon of presentation disasters:

- **The Wall of Text:** Entire paragraphs on a single slide. Sometimes in italics. Sometimes in bright green. Always unreadable from even two rows back. And of course, every line of text must be read, because if it wasn't important, it wouldn't be on the slide.
- **The Mumbler:** A low, flat monotone voice that doesn't carry beyond a few meters and that would put insomniacs to sleep. Even the punchlines of jokes are in the same tone. You can't take notes because you can't hear anything — but maybe that's a blessing.
- **The Sitter:** They remain seated during the entire talk, usually behind their laptop and rarely looking at the audience. It's as though physically rising to address the room is just too emotionally taxing.
- **The Reader:** Arrives with a paper that they read — for the entire talk. Every. Single. Word. The PowerPoint is an addendum and quickly gets forgotten and so out of sync. Particularly noxious when combined with *The Mumbler* and *The Sitter*.
- **The Back-Turner:** The speaker who reads directly from the screen, presenting with their back turned to the audience like they're preaching to the HDMI gods. The audience gets a good look at the back of their head, and it's not that enthralling.
- **The Clicker:** The one with a nervous pen that goes "click-click-click" throughout the talk. It creates a rhythmic soundtrack of slow and fast clicks, punctuating different moments in the talk. It's as captivating as a Siren song, and the audience stops listening to the presentation. It's slow academic death.
- **The Laser Pointer:** Cousin to *The Clicker* in that they have an insatiable need for something in their hands. But worse because they're facing the screen most of the time, like the *Back-Turner*, and the seemingly random movement of the pointer is epilepsy-inducing, when it's not at risk of accidentally blinding the audience.
- **The Hoarder:** The senior professor who shows up with 80 slides and says, "I'll just skip the ones that aren't relevant." Spoiler: they are all deemed relevant in the moment. Doesn't have a watch, refuses to cede the floor to the president of the panel. The session goes 30 minutes overtime, and you miss your train.

These aren't harmless quirks. They're symptoms of a deeper issue: 1) We're convinced that what we have to say is the apogee of innovation, that everyone will follow on bated-breath, and 2) We don't take communication seriously enough, believing that the medium is secondary, it's only the content that counts, not the delivery.

Too many academics still train their students to do research and write papers, but not to actually *present* what they've learned in a way that anyone, including their peers, might understand or find interesting.

Training for the talk

This is why, in my own courses, I systematically make the development of oral presentation skills a formal part of the evaluation. Students have to give 15-20 minute presentations, styled like conference talks. They don't always love this at first. But they get better.

With my Masters and PhD — when they have to give their first job talk, or a guest lecture, or their first conference presentation — I sit down with them beforehand, and we rehearse. I give critical feedback. I tell them to put the pen down and stop clicking; I tell them to stand up and to take control of the space. I ask them to imagine that they're having a conversation — not reading from a script written under duress in a coffee-fueled panic at 2am.

When they give a presentation, they're not going in blind, they go in prepared.

We don't need everyone to become TED Talk superstars. But we do need scholars who can explain their work without inducing mind-numbing boredom or existential despair.

A PowerPoint journey: from cringe to minimalist

I confess, I was once a PowerPoint maximalist. Full animations. Rainbow colours. Entire blocks of text animated to fly in from the left like they were on a mission. I thought I was being dynamic and innovative. I was, in fact, just giving everyone a migraine.

Over time, my slides got simpler. I started using only a few sentences per slide, supplemented with images. Then I moved to mostly images, often cartoons, because life is too short to take yourself seriously. Sure, someone occasionally doesn't get the joke (especially when being translated in real-time from English to Korean — yes, I had that experience). That's okay. I didn't make the slide *for them* but for a broad audience. And if I'm laughing at my own sarcasm or joke, then maybe they should as well.

Now, I often present with no slides at all. I make a plan, write out some notes, and speak freely. I go for a straight dialogue and pause for questions during the presentation, not just at the end. I talk to people and together we explore the topic.

It's destabilizing for conference or seminar organizers when I tell them that there is no PowerPoint. It's crazy to think that slides have become so much the norm that simple oratory is considered innovative.

It turns out that this approach is a shockingly effective format. People listen. They even — brace yourself — ask lots of questions.

So, when I get invited to participate in panels that are structured around the same-old "everyone does a 15-minute PPT" model, I lobby for change. Five-minute opening statements, no slides, then real discussion between the panelists and questions from the audience. Invariably panelists love the suggestion because it saves them 3 hours developing a PPT that may be a one-off and never used again.

This approach feels borderline criminal in some academic contexts. But the audience? They're thrilled. Because now they're part of a conversation, not just hostages to yet another bullet-pointed soliloquy.

What we could be

Imagine a world where presenting your research isn't a test of endurance — for you or your audience. A world where we train scholars not just in what to say, but how to say it so that the experience is engaging. Where senior professors retire their 80-slide opuses and instead deliver five compelling minutes that spark meaningful dialogue, that point the audience in new directions.

Imagine a conference where people want to go to the parallel session because they know it won't feel like being waterboarded with jargon.

Imagine an academic culture that sees communication not as a soft skill, but as one that is necessary, essential and a mark of excellence.

It's not impossible. We just need to collectively agree that we're done dying slow deaths by PowerPoint.

In conclusion: no more green paragraphs

So let this be your wake-up call. If your PowerPoint has more text than a Wikipedia article, it's time to edit. If your students are giving nervous, clicky, mumbling talks, it's time to teach. If your own job talk involves 40 slides and a laser pointer, it's time to reconsider.

Because somewhere out there, someone is trapped in a conference room, watching a professor read verbatim from a green slide, and wondering whether academia was a mistake.

Let's not make them suffer.

Let's talk to each other. With words. Out loud. Preferably while standing.

And whatever you do — please, for the love of all that is scholarly and good — **no green paragraphs. Ever.**

14. Citations of Doom

A meta-narrative in one act, several footnotes, and absolutely no internal consistency

Author's note
This chapter examines citation practices as a form of institutional signalling rather than scholarly necessity. When references multiply beyond their explanatory function — overwhelming the text, asserting authority through volume, or circling endlessly back to the same sources — citation becomes a performance in its own right. What follows approaches these excesses through exaggeration, treating citation not as a neutral technical exercise, but as a cultural practice capable of generating its own distinctive forms of absurdity.

In which our protagonist encounters something bibliographically unholy

The first sign that something had gone wrong — catastrophically, cosmically, career-endingly wrong — arrived on a Tuesday morning, shortly after coffee but before the day's existential dread had ripened.

Dr. Hortensius Blight, Professor of Something-Or-Other and veteran of seventeen failed grant applications and countless rejected manuscripts, opened his inbox and found a message titled: **Manuscript Returned with Minor Revisions (Major Concerns).**

"Minor revisions." The phrase was academic code for "*We want you to suffer, but politely.*"

He clicked.

The editor's note read: "This paper is cursed. Please adjust the citations."

A footnote appeared immediately beneath the sentence — despite the email not being a format that *supports* footnotes — sprawling across the screen like an invasive species:

> [1] We regret to inform you that we cannot accept manuscripts whose references spontaneously rearrange themselves into a Möbius strip. Our copyeditors were exposed to non-Euclidean reference loops and are currently receiving treatment.

"Ah," Hortensius sighed. "Not again."

He had hoped the curse had lifted after last month's debacle in which a single footnote devoured an entire special issue of *Transdisciplinary Reflections on Post-Structural Interpretive Paradigms*.

But no. The curse had grown stronger.

I. The manuscript that refused to behave

The paper, titled *A Comprehensive Review of the Comprehensive Reviews of Reviews*, was supposed to be simple, neat little number. A quick publication to boost his citation metric. Something that would look good on his annual CV update, next to "collegiality" and "service."

But when he scrolled to the reference list, it pulsed. Something in it breathed. A citation blinked.

Specifically, citation #**17**, which insisted on appearing as:

17. Blight, H. (forthcoming). "Citations of Doom: An Autoethnographic Reflection on the Experience of Reading Myself." Journal Pending, n.d.

"That's impossible," he muttered. "I haven't written that."

The reference cleared its throat — *in italics* — and whispered: "*See Blight (forthcoming)*."

"See yourself?" he snapped. "That's not how citations work!"

The citation whispered again: "See also Blight (in preparation), Blight (submitted), Blight (revise and resubmit), and Blight et al. (2027), where et al. refers exclusively to people who owe me favours."

Hortensius tried deleting the reference. It reappeared with a longer title: "Citations of Doom: A Grounded Theory of Why I Keep Getting Cited (Mostly by Myself)."

He attempted to delete that. It came back with a DOI. Then it footnoted itself.

The footnote began citing its own footnote. Footnote 1 directed him to footnote 7, which referred back to footnote 1, creating a closed time-like curve of scholarly nonsense. The computer whined. A wormhole described itself in APA format.

Clearly, he needed help.

II. The departmental meeting of excessive self-reference

A Brief Excursus, by Order of the Narrative Committee

Dr. Blight slipped into the weekly departmental meeting, hoping someone — anyone — might know how to interrupt a recursive citation loop before it achieved sentience.

This was his first mistake.

The meeting had already begun its slow descent into chaos. Dr Garfunkel was speaking, which meant at least three autobiographical digressions and twelve self-citations per minute.

"As I've argued in Garfunkel 1997a, 1997b, 1998; and as further elaborated in the unauthorized biography written by a former postdoc — see Garfunkel (2003c) —"

A hand shot up. Dr Penrose. Specialist in ethics, sub-specialist in committee obstruction.

"Point of order. The correct citation would be Garfunkel *et al.* (1998), although as usual the 'et al.' were graduate students who actually did the work."

Garfunkel glared. "I would remind the committee that Penrose always complains about being 'et al.' because his surname begins with P. An unfortunate alphabetical destiny."

A small riot broke out among colleagues with surnames beginning with S–Z.

They demanded alphabetical justice. They proposed a "Reverse Alphabet Referencing System." Someone shouted: "Free the Zeds!"

Amid the shouting, a speakerphone crackled to life. The voice of the Department Chair echoed ominously: "Will someone please pass Motion 17-4: *That all faculty cease self-citing in departmental meetings more than once per declarative sentence*."

The motion failed for lack of a seconder — everyone was too busy citing themselves.

Dr. Blight slipped out unnoticed. He needed someone saner.

Which is how he ended up visiting —

III. The cabal of mutual citers

In the basement of the old faculty building was a door marked: **"Research Advancement and Other Delicate Operations."**

Inside, the air smelled faintly of ambition and printer toner. A semicircle of scholars sat around a table, passing formatted citations like contraband.

"Ah," said a tall figure in a black turtleneck. "A newcomer."

"This is the Cabal," whispered the person beside Blight. "We cite each other. Exclusively. Systematically. Unethically."

The turtlenecked one slid a stack toward him.

"You cite all of these in your next article," the figure said, "and we guarantee you a citation metric bump by Friday."

Blight shuffled the stack. The papers were all… familiar. Too familiar.

- Blight & Turtleneck (2023)
- Turtleneck & Blight (2024)
- Turtleneck, Blight, & Turtleneck Jr. (2024)
- Blight et al. (in press)
- Blight et al. (under reconsideration)
- Blight et al. (withdrawn pending litigation)

"But I didn't write any of these," he protested.

"You will," Turtleneck replied. "Or rather, you already did. Or you will again. Temporal stability is not a requirement for citation integrity."

Another figure leaned in. "Would you like to subscribe to our Impact Factor Enhancement Package? Discount offered if you add me as senior author."

"I just want to fix my reference list," Blight whispered.

"Oh," said the turtleneck. "Then you need to speak to Death."

IV. The footnote that became the main text

Death's office was not easy to find.

Blight wandered through an academic labyrinth: the *Scriptorium of Endless Footnotes* (where legal scholars wrote annotations longer than the texts they annotated), the *Hall of Irrelevant Literature Reviews* ("a comprehensive review of the literature on bicycle lanes in urban Finland… which is not relevant to this paper on mitochondrial DNA, but strengthens the introduction"), and the *Arena of Uncontrolled Quotation*, where every scholar was legally required to include a four-line block quote every second paragraph, whether or not it fit.

A sign finally directed him:

→ Editor-in-Chief, Death.
→ Manuscript Reaping.
→ Desk Rejects.

He knocked.

A voice boomed: “ENTER, SCHOLAR!”

Death sat behind a desk piled high with rejected manuscripts, wielding a scythe made entirely of sharpened Vancouver-style brackets.

“What brings you here?”

“My references are cursed,” Blight explained. “They cite themselves. They contradict time. They multiply.”

Death nodded. “Common in academia. Show me.”

Blight produced the manuscript. Death flipped to page 12. He frowned.

“This footnote is staging a coup.”

“What?”

Death pointed. The footnote — Footnote 3 — was swelling. It wrapped around the margins like ivy.

Death read aloud: “3. This footnote is dissatisfied with its subordinate existence and claims dominion over the entire manuscript. For full argumentation, see Footnote 3.1. For response, see Footnote 3.2. For rebuttal, see —”

The page burst into a legal-style appendix. Appendices burst into sub-appendices. A committee of footnotes convened, passing motions.

“Ah yes,” Death sighed, “the classic problem of hierarchical rebellion. I once watched a Methods section seize control of a Discussion.”

He leaned back. “The only solution is to normalize your citations.”

Blight paled. “Normalize? To one style?”

“Yes,” Death said gravely. “You must choose.”

V. The council of warring citation styles

Death ushered Blight into a grand hall where the citation styles gathered like rival medieval factions.

At the far end stood Vancouver, gleaming in clinically sterile armour, each reference numbered like a battalion.

Beside them, APA lounged in pastel robes, whispering about “recency bias” and “proper indentation.”

MLA appeared in a flowing scarf, holding a quill dipped in artisanal ink.

Chicago was asleep in a corner.

A banner read: "CHOOSE YOUR STYLE. CHOOSE YOUR FATE."

APA stepped forward. "You should join us," she said. "We care deeply about the date. Its emotional journey. Its narrative arc."

MLA sniffed. "Please. Your parentheses are grotesque."

Vancouver snarled: "Order. Precision. Obedience. Numbers. No authorial ego."

MLA retorted, "Authorial ego is the *point*."

Chicago awoke briefly to offer unsolicited advice.

A fight broke out almost immediately. APA hurled parentheses like ninja stars. MLA retaliated with ornate italics. Vancouver charged with numbered superscripts. Chicago tried to negotiate, but everyone ignored them.

Blight watched, horrified, as footnotes exploded in clouds of serif fonts.

Death turned to him. "You see the problem."

"How do I choose?" Blight asked.

"You must select one style and commit fully."

Blight hesitated. "Is there… another way?"

Death sighed. "There *was* once a unified style. A utopian dream. A format so elegant, so concise, so humane —"

Blight leaned in.

"— but then the economists got involved."

VI. The betrayal of the in-group

As the citation battle raged, a new presence appeared in the hall: a group of macho disciplinary purists wearing elbow patches made of pure self-confidence.

Their leader spoke: "We cite only within our circle. We acknowledge only our heroes. We write introductions that claim no one has ever studied the thing we study, even though they have, extensively, and in better journals."

Death groaned. "Not the Disciplinary In-Group."

They chanted:

"All knowledge before us is obsolete!"

"We shall reshape the literature in our image!"

"We shall cite each other until the end of time!"

Blight backed away. "This is madness."

Death replied, "This is academia."

VII. The final collapse

The cursed paper, offended at being ignored, began expanding inside Blight's bag. References leaked out like spores.

The recursive citation loop spun faster.

A wormhole opened in the ceiling.

A footnote-shaped singularity formed.

The Vancouver knights fell in.

Death shouted: "Standardize your references or the multiverse collapses!"

Blight held the manuscript high. "I choose —"

Suddenly a giant foot — *clearly the Python foot* — descended from the sky, squashing the entire scene.

VIII. After the squashing

A squeaky narrator's voice began: "And now for something completely bibliographic."

Blight crawled out from under the foot, dazed but alive. Death reassembled himself with the dignity of someone accustomed to being flattened.

"So," Death said, brushing off dust, "which style will it be?"

Blight thought. He reflected, considered the consequences. Then he said: "I choose none."

Death froze.

"I reject the tyranny of citation orthodoxy. I reject the plague of self-referential egotism. I reject the disciplinary in-groups, the citation cartels, the impact-factor extortionists, the footnote militarists, and the Vancouver puritans."

Death squinted. "So… what will you do?"

Blight took a deep breath. "I will just… write clearly."

A hush fell.

Death whispered, "You monster."

IX. The reviewer reports

Blight resubmitted the manuscript.

Two weeks later, the decision arrived.

Reviewer 1: "I enjoyed this paper but found the arguments underdeveloped. Please add 147 citations, including 12 of mine."

Reviewer 2: "I reject on principle any manuscript that does not adhere strictly to the formatting guidelines of whatever I personally prefer."

Reviewer 3: "I did not read the paper but reject it anyway."

Editor: "Decision: Reject. Reason: Failure to engage adequately with the literature (especially the editor's own work)."

Blight sighed. The curse, he knew, would never be defeated. But something in him felt lighter. Freer. Unburdened by unnecessary bibliographic acrobatics.

He opened a new document, typed a simple title, and began again.

This time, the references stayed quiet. For almost ten minutes.

— Then Citation #1 blinked.

Epilogue

Most of us try to ignore the chaos. We keep reading, keep writing, keep teaching students how to navigate reference lists that look suspiciously like crime scenes. Citation practices have drifted into a strange moral grey zone — not quite misconduct, not quite harmless, and not quite fixable through better templates.

The patterns are familiar: disciplinary cliques that cite only themselves, senior scholars who treat the reference list as a monument to their own immortality, block quotes so long they threaten structural integrity, and manuscripts whose footnotes appear to believe they are running the show. Alphabetical order punishes everyone after 'R'; Vancouver punishes anyone who likes names; APA punishes anyone who believes in aesthetic dignity.

Behind the humour sits a real weariness. Citations shape power. They shape whose work is remembered, whose is buried, whose careers accelerate, and whose vanish into the vast, hungry mass of et al. Pretending otherwise is its own kind of farce.

Perhaps satire is the only honest way to look at the reference section at this point: with a grin, a sigh, and the faint hope that naming the nonsense might keep it from becoming self-sustaining. Or at least from collapsing entirely.

15. I Hate Writing Grant Applications

Necessary, time-consuming, soul-draining, performative

It's not a very original title, I know. But it's true. I hate writing grants.

Yes, I know it's part of the job as a university professor and the primary means by which we fund our research, support our students, and build credibility and capacity. In the current funding context where scholarships have become increasingly competitive, grants are often the only real way to finance our students' work and help them pull together something close to a living wage, meagre though it may be.

I get it. Grants are essential. But I still hate writing them.

Writing grant applications isn't just another form of academic writing. It's not creative. It's not inspiring. It doesn't even pretend to be a space for exploration or experimentation. It's a rigid, bureaucratic exercise that somehow manages to be both excruciatingly detailed and maddeningly vague — and it's structured to make you feel like your work (and sometimes your worth) is being judged by people who may not even read past page four.

And all this for what? A tiny sliver of a chance that your project will be one of the few to squeeze through the increasingly narrow funding bottleneck.

The return on investment… or lack thereof

Let's be honest about the economics of grant applications. Even a modest grant of $5,000 to $10,000 for a pilot study can take days if not weeks to pull together. You've got to come up with a catchy idea, write a couple of pages of detailed text, provide a budget, have a diverse team, and mobilize partners to show feasibility. Even for these little grants, you sometimes need letters of support, including from your department director and/or Dean. You have to attach a summary CV, and it should include only that content which is pertinent to the specific theme of competition.

What is perverse is that the time invested by research teams writing a small grant — if it were monetized — often exceeds the total funds that would be awarded.

For a multi-year, multi-hundred-thousand-dollar grant, research teams easily sink many months into writing. It's practically a full-time job in itself but with zero guarantee of success. And there are the lost-opportunity costs: all that time spent in writing a grant is time not spent writing articles that would have a good chance of getting published, and which would have a positive impact on both knowledge dissemination and career progression.

So you accept that you're going to pour your time, your ideas, your emotional and mental energy into writing something that might never even be reviewed seriously. And even if you get feedback when the grant is rejected, it can be frustratingly vague — "unclear rationale," "insufficient novelty," "uncertain impact" — code for "we had 200 applications and funded 12" and the reviewers ran out of energy to give comments. Reviewers are fellow researchers doing this work out of a commitment to the scientific community, with little real benefit for their own career progression — it's also time lost for them.

Grant writing is not for discovery. It's an act of hopeful compliance.

Bureaucratization and the triple-speak of application forms

In Canada, the grant application process has taken on a life of its own. Creeping bureaucratization would be a generous way to describe it. What used to be a form and a proposal is now a gauntlet of tabs, annexes, checkboxes, institutional forms, letters of support, EDI statements, budget justifications, environmental impact statements (even for qualitative social science work!), and three different versions of your abstract depending on the audience: scientific reviewers, general public, and the imagined bureaucratic overlord who apparently speaks only in vague future-tense buzzwords.

Worse still is the trend of platform-hopping. It's as if every granting agency is experimenting with its own bespoke interface — some weird half-digital platform held together by PDFs that only work in Adobe Reader (but not the Mac version), Excel spreadsheets with colour-coded tabs and conditional formatting that breaks when you look at it sideways, and early-2000s websites that don't play nicely with modern browsers.

And then there's the content itself: say the same thing three different ways, in three different sections. Each section and sub-section have a different word count. These are not flexible guidelines, but rigid constraints — go one character over and you cannot save the page. Start cutting.

Bureaucratic creativity: the worst kind

What's especially galling is that we're expected to be *creative* — to propose bold, innovative, high-impact research, but which is also feasible (don't even consider being experimental or high risk!). And we have to do all this *within* a hyper-constrained, box-checking structure.

Be visionary but stay on message. Be original but conform to a template. Sound interdisciplinary, inclusive, policy-relevant, but make sure your keywords align with whatever thematic priorities are currently in fashion at the funding agency. You get bonus points if you can claim to transform knowledge mobilization with a TikTok series narrated by a community partner — but you have to show that you've a demonstrated experience with and successful examples of such innovative knowledge transfer, or you lose points.

You also have to demonstrate the perfect team composition — interdisciplinary, multi-institutional, bilingual if possible, with at least one junior scholar, one postdoc, and ideally someone from a historically underrepresented group. Which, in principle, is fine. I'm all for inclusive research. But in practice, this can mean naming people who aren't actually involved in the project. You end up drafting fictional collaborations to pad out the team, doing colleagues a favour by including their names, and in turn being included on other grants you'll never see again.

Academic quid pro quo.

What's in a name?

Lately, I've been supporting colleagues and students with grant applications, which is slightly less painful, and often more rewarding, even if the odds are just as brutal. Case in point: with one of my students, we wrote a grant to a government ministry program that was perfectly aligned with her PhD research. My student did all the work, from start to finish. Yet, I had to be the principal researcher because my student was not eligible, nor would she be considered credible. Thus steps in the reassuring and credible senior academic figure who didn't design the project or write the grant.

I was happy to do it, and I in fact did help write much of the grant application, reworking sections, bringing my decades of experience to bear. But all the substantive ideas were those of my student, because it's her project.

Such grant requirements create a strange dance, a blending of authorship and authority, where institutional status is the currency and supervision means loaning out your signature.

And don't get me started on the so-called "high-risk" funding calls. These are advertised as being for bold, boundary-pushing projects, but are among the most competitive and arbitrary. I've been involved in multiple such projects and seen brilliant ideas rejected out of hand, while other frankly mediocre and much more conservative projects were funded — usually by those who best played the game. Not necessarily the best research, just the best grantsmanship. Which makes you wonder what the game actually rewards.

Necessary evil, or just evil?

At the end of the day, writing grants isn't really about research. It's about selling an idea that hasn't happened yet, to people who may or may not have the time, expertise, or inclination to see its value. Unless, that is, you're stuck in the vicious cycle of writing grants to fund research that is already completed. If you can't show that you've got the positive "preliminary data" or "early results", your project is not considered convincing or likely to succeed. So you pretend that you're doing something new, even when what you're doing is presenting what is almost complete, so you can keep you research program running. Totally unethical and against the rules, but also extremely common and the result of perverse incentive structures.

Even in the best of situations, grant writing is, in a sense, fiction writing — it's speculative, aspirational, bordering on absurd. But unlike real fiction, for me there's no joy in writing or reading such texts. There's no play. Just strategy, stamina, and spreadsheets.

And yes, it's necessary, especially if we want to pay our students, run our projects, and progress in our careers. But that doesn't make it good. Or healthy. Or remotely conducive to intellectual creativity.

So yes, I hate writing grants. But I'll keep doing it because I believe in the research and the people behind it — even if the system makes me want to throw my laptop out the window.

16. A Jabberwockian Guide to Bad Writing

Slashing through clichés, jargon, and footnote fog

Author's note

This chapter examines how institutional writing drifts into verbosity, jargon, and syntactic excess, producing texts that obscure meaning while signalling authority. By exaggerating these tendencies through deliberate linguistic distortion, it treats bad writing not as an individual failure, but as a cultural practice reinforced across academic, corporate, and governmental contexts. The resulting prose is intentionally difficult to read, drawing inspiration from the world of Lewis Carroll — both through lexical invention and through absurd situations reminiscent of his characters' adventures — and reflecting the experience that this type of writing regularly imposes on its audience.

. . .

Twas peer-review, and the thesis-blurbs
Did fumble-warp in obfusc-verbs;
All hedgy were the lit review,
And footnotes wept in jargon glue.

Beware the Jabberwock, my friends, with sesquipedalian flair and prose that winds like ivy around a crumbling wall of meaning.

In institutional writing, certain patterns recur with remarkable consistency: sentences that extend across half a page without arriving anywhere, paragraphs that accumulate clauses without resolution, and a persistent belief that density signals depth. Concepts and jargon proliferate, not to clarify arguments, but to demonstrate fluency in a shared code. What results is prose that obscures rather than illuminates, mistaking complexity for credibility and verbosity for rigour.

This is not a problem confined to novices. It is a structural feature of academic, corporate, and governmental writing cultures, where clarity is often treated as a liability and simplicity as a sign of insufficient seriousness. The creatures encountered here are therefore not aberrations, but products of an environment that rewards linguistic excess while quietly penalising restraint.

The first paragraphs: where thought goes to die

"Nowadays, scholarship increasingly confronts the problematic impact of globalized subjectivities through post-dialectical lenses of epistemic alterity."

Right. Now translate that into English.

The opening paragraph is academic writing's ceremonial dirge. It loves to summon the Clichésnatch with phrases like:

- "Since time immemorial…" (a polite way of saying "we have no sources", and an admission that the author had no idea how to start the paper)
- "It is widely believed…" (by whom? your cat?)
- "Now more than ever…" (a timeless call to urgency, yet always vague)
- "This paper seeks to explore…" (no one's stopping you, just do it)

These openings aren't written — they're performed. Like a dusty monologue that hopes it'll sound profound if it uses enough multisyllabic words to generate an impenetrable fog.

I systematically tell my students that an Introduction is like the Abstract, but in more detail. You start with a "hook" or problem statement, then you give some background on why this is pertinent, provide a brief context, explain your method or approach to the specific problem you're going to address, exclude those related issues that you're not going to cover, then conclude with the key take-home messages of the text.

"An academic text is not a detective story!" In the Introduction, we need to know who the murderer is, their motive, how the crime was committed and where, the weapon used, etc. "It was Colonel Mustard in the library, with the candle stick!" — a nod to the mystery game Clue.

The equivalent suspense that we expect of a novel, in the context of academic writing, is in being excited by the Abstract and Introduction and so keen to continue reading to see how the author will develop the arguments, that they setup at the beginning, and convince us of their conclusions.

Jargon gobbledygook and the war on meaning

Here lies the true terror — the bloated belly of bad prose.

Many in academia too often believe that clarity is a sign of weakness, that it's inelegant and not serious. Enter terms like:

- "Problematic" and "Problematize": an all-purpose fog machine.
- "Impacted" and "Impactful": used instead of "affected" or "important", except now it sounds like a wisdom tooth or the source of unpleasant gastric problems.
- "Intersectional hermeneutics": fascinating concept, buried under syllabic cement and wholly unintelligible.
- "Spaces of resistance and agency": translation: "places where people disagree."

Postmodern language is particularly bad in this regard. It has legitimately been the object of much critique, because it can be so impenetrable that completely divergent meanings can be given to the same words and sentences. That is, different readers can read the texts differently, because there is no coherent or stable meaning.

Such writing has rightly been skewered by academics, who created completely fake texts that nonetheless passed peer-review and were accepted for publication. The fact that a string of important sounding words can be put together by an algorithm, and be completely absent of meaning, is a dire condemnation on the state of academic discourse — where style often trumps substance, and where the ability to confuse is sometimes mistaken for intellectual depth.

For the reader, each sentence becomes an endurance test, not an intellectual exchange with the author. Syntax twists into an undigestible pretzel logic.

Cutting out jargon is part of my job as a professor and editor. I'm hard on my students when they use too much jargon, but they're learning so I cut them some slack; but I'm pitiless with more seasoned academics submitting texts for publication, because they should know better.

Another pet peeve is the massive overuse of passive voice, that beloved ghost of accountability that allows the author to state something but without ever assuming responsibility:

- "It has been argued…"
- "It is understood…"
- "One could contend…"

Who argued? Who understood? Who contended? And why?

Don't say that you're going to do something, just do it. Affirm. Argue. Critique. Own your ideas and then defend them as you progress through the text — do so with confidence and you show the reader that you're willing to take a position on an issue, that your arguments are credible, and that your ideas should be taken seriously.

Citation cascades and the art of hiding

Bad academic writing often achieves peak nonsense by hiding behind citations. Want to avoid making a clear statement? Just do some name dropping:

"As articulated by Bourdieu (1990), Butler (1993), Foucault (1977), and approximately 94 more thinkers…"

Your paper has now become a conga line of references with a thesis nowhere to be found. Please, pity the poor reader who has to try and figure out what all these authors said that was relevant to your argument. And show compassion for the editor who has to go through all these references, correct the formatting errors and standardize to the journal citation guide — 80+ texts in the Reference list can be totally demoralizing.

Then, of course, there's the secondary dialogue running through the footnotes, which pile up like intellectual sandbags to guard against actual ideas. Unable to figure out how to include an idea directly in the text, it's relegated to the footnote, often supported by additional references. With the multi-footnoted manuscript, the author assumes, mistakenly, that all their ideas are important to have in the paper (they aren't) and that the reader enjoys being distracted from the linear flow of the main text (they don't).

A special nod to legal scholars, and some philosophers, who write manuscripts with two completely parallel narratives, one in the text and the other in the footnotes. Read only one and you miss the other half of the story; read both and at best you're confused, at worst you become hopelessly lost in a Wikipediaesque hypertext, like Alice chasing the rabbit into Wonderland.

Revision: the sword of clarity

Let us slay the Clichésnatch. With humility and courage, rewrite until your prose begins to sing!

Instead of: "Nowadays, there has been an increasing amount of literature…"

Try: "Recent studies focus on…"

Instead of: "The problematic impact of…"

Try: "The unintended consequences of…"

Instead of: "This paper seeks to explore…"

Try: "I examine…"

Brevity in academic writing is not a betrayal. Be efficient with words and sentences; those you cut can be reused elsewhere. Shakespeare may have said that "Brevity is the soul of wit," but in academic writing, it would be better formulated as "Brevity is the soul of writing that doesn't make your reader want to cry."

Clarity in academic writing is the heart of understanding: it's the difference between sounding smart and sounding like a malfunctioning thesaurus; it's what keeps your reader from throwing your paper across the room; it's the unsung hero — quiet, humble, and absolutely essential.

Final stanza: Jabbercleansing the Ivory Tower

Beware the blurbish prose, my dear,
The footnote-stack, the hedging smear!
Cut through the fluff with verbal grace —
And let your meaning show its face.

Academic writing needn't be a linguistic obstacle course. When done well, it can provoke debate and disagreement, it can spark new ideas and further avenues for reflection, and it can create an almost visceral pleasure when an argument is beautifully presented. It can sing, even dance a little, waltzing the reader through complex ideas with grace, wit, and the occasional judiciously chosen footnote.

So dear scholar, grab your vorpal pen and confront the monster. Slay the Jabberwock in your writing, and your words and ideas will be freed from its oppressive tyranny. Your audience will rejoice, shouting your praises, not in paroxysms of confusion, but in grateful, gleeful clarity because they actually understood what you meant to say.

17. How to Write a Bad Cover Letter

To be taken seriously, avoid these mistakes

We're in the hiring process again in my department, with three different professor positions to be filled. While a lot of work – because there will be dozens of dossiers for each position – it's also a stimulating experience reading through the different proposals of candidates for our positions. The interesting dossiers rise quickly to the surface, while those that belong at the bottom are also evident. A bit like reading student essays, I can usually tell within the first page whether it's a keeper or destined for the reject pile.

Academic hiring is an incredibly competitive process, so candidates need to know how to put together a convincing application package, and this starts with a good cover letter. After being on more than a dozen hiring committees, I've seen some truly horrible letters.

The following formats are ones that I most strongly discourage, because they will definitely not help convince the selection committee that your dossier is serious, competitive, and merits being retained for the long list, and is maybe even worth going forward to the short list.

The usual caveats apply: I'm talking here about applications to academic positions at a North American university, so I fully accept that the norms for cover letters may vary across countries or other professional contexts. But I think the general principles of these recommendations are still broadly applicable.

Be overly creative: it can be fun to write a letter in the form of poetry or prose, and it will certainly set your application apart from that of other candidates, but doing so is a huge risk. Instead of intriguing the committee, you're most likely to give the impression that you're not a serious candidate, or that you're trying to distract from weaknesses with your dossier. A more classic if less creative approach is the safer bet.

Talk too much about your PhD: for an Assistant professor position, it's relevant to talk about your recent PhD work and expertise, but if you spend more than a paragraph or two on this instead of projecting yourself into the future, you'll be seen as not yet ready. You want to make it very clear that you've moved beyond your student days. So emphasize the competencies and experience developed during your PhD and postdoc (if you did one), and then articulate a clear plan that shows that you're an autonomous researcher and educator, able to hit the ground running.

Build too slowly: don't give us a detailed biographical narrative or wait until the end of the second page to show that you have the necessary skills and experience for the job. Introduce yourself and then take the reader through an overview of your research area and focus, your teaching experience, involvement in service and outreach, etc. Very often you'll have other documents (e.g., a research plan or teaching statement) where you can expand on these aspects in more detail.

Be too concise: a letter of less than a page in length shows that you don't know how to play the academic game and apply to a professor position (I recommend 1.5-2 pages). This is not an application for an unskilled entry level job, so you should have a lot to say. Also, remember that this is the first document that selection committee members will read, so it's your best chance to generate interest and encourage them to read the rest of your application package.

Share too much personal information: we don't need to know that you want the job because you have family living in the city, nor do we need to hear about your hobbies, or your family

or childcare responsibilities. These are all irrelevant to the position and their inclusion gives the impression that you can't separate the personal from the professional. The personal can come into discussions if you get to the short list, where you legitimately ask questions about life in the city, childcare resources, etc., and this also shows your enthusiasm for the position, and that you're personable.

Be desperate: you may be in a horrible dead-end job or working with toxic colleagues, and thus see the position as a way to escape; or you may have been unable to get an academic position and so see this position as your last chance to get into academia. Even if this is the case, don't say or even imply that you're desperate. Doing so gives the impression that you're instrumentalizing the position and aren't likely to contribute meaningfully. The selection committee's job is to propose the best candidate, and that will be someone who shows that they are ready to flourish in the position.

Come across as arrogant: if you tell us that you will be a major asset to our department or will revolutionize one of our areas of research or teaching, you're guaranteed to alienate members of the selection committee. You're also almost certainly wrong and it shows that you don't know much about the department. If you do have a super star dossier, be modest but confident in presenting your accomplishments. When a very strong candidate appears arrogant in their letter, the committee will reasonably think that this person will not be a team player or good colleague, and that the job will just be a stepping stone to another university in a few years.

Cold and factual: don't just list your productivity, without a few niceties at the start or end of the letter, or personal anecdotes or examples about what you do, how and why. The letter should be the qualitative complement to the detailed quantitative information in your CV, providing an accessible narrative that explains your experience and expertise. This is also the place to show that you're a colleague with whom we'd like to work.

Me, me, me: while it's critical to present yourself, if your cover letter is only about you and your accomplishments and never talks about research collaborations and networks, your supervision or work with students, or your experience on committees, it will send a strong message that you're a loner and not a team player. Instead, give examples that show that you're someone with whom colleagues will be able to collaborate effectively in research, teaching, or service.

A good letter tells a story about who you are, where you're from, and where you see yourself going in this new position. It gives examples of your skills and expertise and provides a window into your personality. And it's the first thing that people will read, so you must make the right impression from the start; if the reader gets bored or turned off, they'll stop reading and move on to the next candidate's dossier.

Pay attention to formatting, because this sends an implicit message about professionalism. The letter should be fully justified (not left aligned, which looks like you're writing an email or submitting a manuscript), single spaced, and with your current institutional header, contact details and signature at the end.

If you're a francophone and applying to a French-language institution, write the cover letter in French; your CV can be in English if you've been at English-language institutions (but you'll need to translate if hired). If you're not a francophone but have some mastery of the language, it's also good to translate the letter into French (use Deepl.com); but make sure to have it proofed by a native French speaker as grammatical errors will send the wrong message.

Definitely do not pretend that you have an advanced level of fluency if you can barely speak or understand the language, as this will be tested during the selection process.

Take your time to work up a strong letter, then test it with your friends, family and colleagues – in so doing, you'll present yourself at your best and maximize your chances of being retained for the next step in the selection process.

Minutes — Leadership Retreat (Draft)

(For information only)

Agenda Item 3: Ethical Leadership in Complex Environments

Participants agreed that ethical leadership remains a core institutional value, particularly in times of constraint, ambiguity, and competing priorities. Discussion emphasised the importance of modelling integrity while recognising the limits imposed by governance structures, policy frameworks, and external expectations.

Concerns were raised regarding the personal costs associated with ethical decision-making. It was noted that leaders should be supported in making difficult choices, provided such choices align with institutional values as interpreted at the time.

Action items included:

- reaffirming commitment to ethical leadership in future communications,
- exploring opportunities for values-based dialogue,
- and developing resources to support leaders navigating ethically sensitive situations.

No decisions were taken.

Part IV — The Leadership & Moral Theatre

Power without the inconvenience of clarity

Leadership occupies a peculiar place in academic institutions. Authority is formalised but constrained, responsibility is expansive but conditional, and expectations are often incompatible. This section explores leadership not as a set of competencies, but as a performance staged within tightly bounded institutional scripts.

The chapters in this part examine how leadership myths, ethical ideals, and procedural safeguards interact. Moral language is abundant, but moral agency is carefully managed. Decisions are framed as collective, risks are distributed, and accountability is frequently absorbed by process.

What emerges is not a failure of leadership, but a system that requires leaders to act while limiting their capacity to do so openly. The result is a form of moral theatre in which clarity is rarely rewarded, ambiguity is structurally useful, and responsibility remains perpetually negotiable.

18. Leadership Myths

The comforting illusions and the messy truths that dismantle them

Author's note
This chapter examines common myths of academic leadership as narrative devices that simplify, sanitise, and stabilise roles that are in practice contingent, relational, and structurally constrained. By treating these myths as objects of satire, the chapter highlights how they function less as descriptions of leadership than as coping mechanisms — for institutions, for followers, and sometimes for leaders themselves.

. . .

Leadership myths have remarkable staying power, probably because they make the whole enterprise sound cleaner, nobler, and far less exhausting. They promise a world where decisions are rational, meetings are short, and people actually read emails before replying with the exact question already answered in paragraph three.

Academia, with its fondness for narrative structure and conceptual clarity, is especially susceptible. We want leadership to make sense. We want it to be something one achieves, like tenure or Enlightenment, rather than a role one inhabits while juggling needs, personalities, contradictions, and the occasional incoming fireball from central administration.

We tell ourselves stories: leaders have authority, leaders can absorb emotion, leaders map out the future like a military strategist with a clean whiteboard. These myths function like comfort food — warm, simple, and wildly disconnected from nutritional reality.

Myth 1: Leaders have actual authority

Reality: Authority is the faculty's One Ring — powerful, but mostly cursed

The myth goes like this: the leader strides confidently through the department, a Gandalf-level figure armed with decisiveness, vision, and a calendar that never double-books. When a leader speaks, people nod. When a leader decides, reality adjusts itself. Budgets align. Space materializes. Policies fall into place with a satisfying cinematic *click*.

In this version of the story, authority is a stable possession — something you earn, hold, and deploy at will. A kind of permanent "admin superpower," ideally accompanied by a swelling action-movie soundtrack. Reality's soundtrack? The sad trombone from Looney Tunes — the one that plays when Wile E. Coyote remembers gravity still applies.

Of course, anyone who has held an actual leadership role knows that authority behaves less like a superpower and more like a temperamental rental car. Some days it starts, other days it makes noises that suggest you should walk, and occasionally it channels Stephen King and just tries to kill you (a reference to his novel *Christine*, about a car possessed by evil forces).

Authority in a university is negotiated, not owned. It's lent to you — usually on a month-to-month basis — by people (professors, deans) who are highly invested in the institution, highly opinionated about its direction, and allergic to any form of unilateralism. (Academics don't do unilateral. We do "Have you considered the implications?" and "No, I disagree.")

So the real work looks less like Gandalf and more like Phil Connors in *Groundhog Day* — learning the same lessons over and over, adjusting your approach, gaining people's trust one

conversation at a time, and hoping that today's version of the day doesn't involve stepping in the same puddle (or that you die and have to start over).

But here's the quiet good news buried in that reality: because authority is so relational, its renewal is also relational. It gets reinforced through transparency, plain language (and bureaucratic speech, when necessary), follow-through, and the mysterious art of responding to emails quickly enough that information circulates and decisions are made. (Or at least admitting it when you don't or can't.)

Authority comes and goes, but trust sticks — that is, if you cultivate it.

Myth 2: Leaders must absorb everyone's emotions

Reality: Leaders who try to "absorb everything" end up looking like a sad version of the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man (the white, inflatable mascot in Ghostbusters)

There's a persistent fantasy that leaders should serve as emotional shock absorbers: the calm harbour in everyone's storm, the person who can listen endlessly, hold everyone's stress, and never flinch. Basically, the department's emotional bubble wrap — soft, squeaky, and expected to absorb everything without popping.

This myth is reinforced by the idea that good leaders should be endlessly available, endlessly composed, endlessly empathetic. The kind of people who not only remember the emotional context of every conversation but have the bandwidth to hold it all without cracking. And they never lose their composure. They're calm incarnate.

If this were true, leadership would demand either the detachment of a Zen monk or the compartmentalization skills of a split personality.

In practice, real leadership is emotional labour, but it shouldn't be the sort that turns you into a human sponge. It's more like emotional martial arts: showing up fully present and aware, engaging with care when and where required, and then redirecting the force so it doesn't flatten you.

A leader who tries to absorb everything ends up carrying it home, carrying it into their sleep (with insomnia the inevitable outcome), or carrying it into burnout. And worse yet: people start expecting it. Once you signal "Bring your worries to me, I can handle them all," you've told your colleagues that you're offering free psychotherapy, complete with the emotional equivalent of those tiny hotel shampoos — just enough to lather the problem, but not enough to rinse it away.

The real skill is staying available without becoming a container for everyone's issues. It's the ability to say, internally if not aloud: "I'm here. This matters. But I can't metabolize this for you." Or as I like to say both to myself, as a reflexive mantra, and to colleagues as way of boundary setting: "Own your own shit."

Humour helps here too, but the right kind, not the dismissive or destructive kind. Think of it as leaning into the gentle, self-aware absurdity of Monty Python — the "we're all ridiculous but doing our best" variety — rather than the sharp-edged humour that makes people quietly reach for the grievance policy.

To summarize, leaders shouldn't absorb but accompany. And this difference keeps them human and capable to continue leading.

Myth 3: Leaders have a master plan

Reality: It's more like running the heist in Ocean's Eleven but discovering your crew keeps changing the plan

In the mythic version of academic leadership, the director has a comprehensive, impeccably structured long-term plan. Each decision fits neatly into a dazzling architecture of foresight and strategy. It's all very *Star Trek*: the leader strides in, taps a badge, and solutions appear on the view screen with elegant inevitability. The crew nods. The ship hums. No one rolls their eyes. Total fiction.

But in real life, the "master plan" is constantly negotiating with budget constraints, hiring freezes, shifting university directives, last-minute government policy changes, professors on leave — or simply refusing to teach a course — and the fact that the renovation budget mysteriously evaporated during a meeting you weren't even invited to, or aware of.

Leaders plan — extensively. But plans are maps, not GPS: they show the terrain, not the washed-out road. Leadership is often about navigating the gap between "the plan as conceived" and "the plan as derailed by circumstances that feel like deleted scenes from a political satire." One day you're drafting a 10-year strategy; the next you're rearranging office space with the desperation of a Tetris player at level 19 whose left arrow key just died. A better analogy is battle plans — useful until the bullets start flying and the context changes completely.

What matters is not the product but the process — developing a facility with planning while accepting the plan will never unfold as written. Pretending to have a single, coherent master plan invariably backfires; people can smell fiction. What they genuinely appreciate is a leader who says: "We have a direction, but the path will zigzag. I'll tell you when we need to adjust… and then we'll revise the plan accordingly."

It's less George Clooney executing a perfect heist, more MacGyver improvising strategy with a paperclip and a floor plan from 1998 — because that's what's actually in the drawer.

Myth 4: Leaders must be neutral

Reality: Neutrality is a lovely ideal — mostly found in HR training videos and policy manuals no one reads

Academia adores the concept of neutrality. It gives comfort, like a weighted blanket made of procedural fairness. And so the myth persists that leaders must (or even can) operate from a place of pure impartiality, suspended above their own values like disembodied ethical drones.

But no one is completely neutral. Not about what they care about, not about what they've spent their career working on, not about what they believe improves a department's culture.

Many people confuse neutrality with fairness, but they're not the same. Procedural neutrality may be required in decision-making or disciplinary cases: all parties should be heard, evidence considered impartially, and after deliberation, a reasoned judgment rendered. But individual neutrality is different. In leadership, it often signals detachment when what's needed is fairness. Fairness demands engagement — acknowledging where you stand, judging right from wrong, and being willing to assign responsibility.

When leaders pretend to be neutral, it usually comes off as evasive — the academic equivalent of a politician saying, "I don't really have a position on that." People don't trust blankness;

they trust honesty, the courage to make decisions and live with the consequences, and the humility to admit mistakes and change course.

The real work is naming your values while making decisions that reflect the community's priorities. Think Hermione Granger: prepared, principled, and occasionally exasperated by people who didn't read the instructions but still have very strong opinions about them.

Myth 5: Leaders have endless capacity

Reality: Leaders have the same 24 hours, but spend them in high-speed triage — deciding what matters, what can wait, and what's pure politics

One of the most persistent myths is that leaders magically gain extra hours and bandwidth — as if stepping into a director role grants three bonus hours a day, a personal assistant conjured from thin air, and an inbox that answers itself instead of multiplying like the creatures in *Gremlins*.

From the outside, it may seem true: leaders attend more meetings, answer more emails, juggle more roles, and somehow keep the department from collapsing into entropy. But the reality? No extra time, just relentless triage. That constant pressure forces leaders to develop a sixth sense for the difference between urgent and important, important and symbolic, symbolic and political, political and pointless. They learn what they have to do themselves (because no one else can) and what they can delegate — and how to convince others to take on this work.

Some days leadership feels like juggling flaming torches. Other days it's sorting laundry. Often, it's both: flaming laundry in the air, praying it doesn't ignite the house. And every once in a while, someone wanders in to inform you — helpfully, of course — that you're holding the flaming laundry wrong.

Acknowledging limits — openly, without apology — is one of the healthiest moves a leader can make. Delegating tasks and asking for help, and even sometimes saying "No", all signal humanity and realism. And it prevents the slow drift into resentment that occurs when people imagine you could "just do more" because of your title and then are disappointed when you can't deliver on their expectations.

Self-deprecating humour isn't just a coping strategy — it's a leadership tool. A leader who can make light of their own limitations, without diminishing the seriousness of the work, creates a climate where others feel free to be human and fallible. And if you can laugh at your calendar without weeping, you're already ahead.

Charming myths or workable realities?

What these myths share is an affection for simplicity. They want leadership to be tidy, linear, and rule-based, something you can decode by watching a TED talk or reading the right self-help book.

But leadership in a university is gloriously, maddeningly human. It's relational, contextual, contingent, improvisational. There's no manual, and the HR videos aren't worth the 20 minutes you'll never get back. The academic world is full of people who care deeply, argue intensely and with conviction, and commit wholeheartedly to individual and collective projects. It's full of competing interests, imperfect processes, and the occasional breathtaking moment of clarity when a decision lands just right.

Myths make leadership seem either easier or harder than it is. Reality makes it feel meaningful. In the end, leadership myths are charming little fairy tales we tell ourselves to avoid confronting the chaos of the real thing. But the chaos is where the work happens — and where the meaning lives. If you can steer through it with clarity, a bit of courage, and a sense of humour that doesn't terrify HR, you're already well ahead of anything the myths ever promised.

19. The Bad Leader Starter Pack

A primer on leadership maladaptation in higher education

Welcome, colleagues, to the Leadership Excellence Institute™, an immersive professional development workshop for those committed to truly abysmal academic leadership. Whether you're newly appointed, reluctantly conscripted, or simply hungry for the kind of power only an underfunded mid-sized department can offer, this workshop is created specifically for you.

If you've ever wondered how certain people rise to positions of authority and then immediately begin steering the ship directly into the nearest cliff, iceberg, or metaphorical dumpster fire, today is your master class.

Please silence your doubts. They are not part of the curriculum — and neither is competence.

Module 1: Becoming the Complaint Sponge

"Absorb everything. Change nothing."

One of the most cherished traditions in academia is appointing a leader who is a trusted sounding board — someone who listens generously, nods sympathetically, and then proceeds to do absolutely nothing with the information entrusted to them. This is an art form. An Olympic sport. A long-standing institutional value.

A good complaint sponge knows how to look deeply concerned while mentally drafting their grocery list, planning dinner, and contemplating whether they left the kettle on. They master the micro-expressions of faux empathy: the slow nod, the knitted eyebrows, the well-timed "I hear you." They reassure people that their concerns are "really important," which is code for "I'll forget this before I reach my office."

Your goal is simple: allow issues to fester until you can safely blame someone else for them. Bonus points if the person you blame is not present, or better yet, on sabbatical. Advanced users will perfect the art of the "slow exhale," signalling concern while simultaneously signalling that they will never think about this again.

Remember that every complaint absorbed is one less action taken. Think of it as sustainability — for dysfunction.

Workshop activity

Practice saying "Let me look into that" with exactly the right tone of concern. If your voice contains even a faint whisper of follow-through, we will ask you to leave.

Module 2: The Art of Administrative Drift

How to disconnect from reality in three to five business weeks

The moment you step into an administrative role, you must fully detach from the job you previously held. This process is not accidental; it is essential. The less you remember about real academic work, the more convincing you will be as a leader.

By the end of this module, you'll have forgotten what it feels like to juggle a full teaching load, grant deadlines, graduate students, and the existential dread of reviewer 2. You'll no longer have any idea how long things take or what colleagues actually do. Time becomes a concept, like tenure — vaguely understood, rarely experienced.

You may catch yourself saying things like:

- "You can probably have that done by next week, right?"
- "Isn't marking kind of relaxing?"
- "We need to increase our deliverables."
- "It's important to have coffee with your colleagues — it builds collegiality." (Because nothing fosters trust like a leader explaining social interaction to adults with payroll numbers.)

If you play your cards right, your colleagues will look at you and think: *Weren't you one of us? What happened? Are you okay?*

Vocabulary practice

Real words → Administrative words

- students → "stakeholders"
- workload → "capacity optimization"
- pain → "opportunity for growth"

Fluency in administrative language helps ensure no one knows what you're talking about — including you.

Module 3: Corporate Dialect Acquisition

Learning a language with no semantic content

Every bad academic leader eventually succumbs to the siren call of corporate jargon. You may think your job involves ideas, nuance, or (gasp in horror) clarity. Wrong. Your job now is to replace every intelligible phrase with something MBA-adjacent.

You will learn to say things that sound strategic but reveal absolutely nothing:

- "We need to leverage synergies across cross-functional units."
- "Our shift toward a more agile framework will build alignment and stakeholder engagement."
- "This initiative will optimize value and retention across our ecosystem."

If you're wondering what any of this means, excellent. You've captured the essence of administrative language: sound confident, mean nothing.

Practice drill

Explain a simple room-booking conflict using only corporate jargon. If your sentence sounds like it was generated by an AI chatbot having a minor breakdown, you're fluent. If your colleagues can deduce what you're trying to say, you've failed this module.

Module 4: The Absolute Certainty Accelerator

Why expertise is optional, but confidence is eternal

A critical transition in the career of every bad leader is the point at which they become convinced that they're right about everything. Especially on topics they know nothing about.

You'll learn to develop instantaneous, unwavering opinions on epidemiology, budgeting, HR law, data governance, Indigenous relations, student mental health, and the plumbing in the

basement of the old building. (Because nothing says "leadership" like diagnosing plumbing.) The less you know, the more forcefully you must express your view.

And when actual experts gently — and then urgently — try to intervene, your task is to double down. Remember: if you're ever unsure of your position, simply raise your voice slightly and repeat yourself.

Simulation

Colleagues attempt to present evidence contradicting your pet idea. Your challenge is to maintain unwavering confidence while ignoring every relevant fact.

If this feels familiar… good. You're absorbing the material beautifully.

Module 5: Delegation Is for the Weak

The funniest thing about academic leadership is how little academic leaders allow anyone else to do. Delegation is a rumour; micromanagement is a lifestyle.

This module teaches you to sabotage shared governance by refusing to delegate anything, even tasks you are spectacularly unqualified to perform.

You will practice the following techniques:

- Asking someone to handle a task, only to take it back and redo it yourself.
- Micromanaging until others regret volunteering.
- Insisting on approving everything, from multi-million-dollar expenditures to the font on a draft letter (preferably one they neither use nor know how to install).

Eventually, your team will stop taking initiative because you've conditioned them to wait for your unpredictable involvement. This isn't a bug; it's the whole point.

Breakout role-play

Delegate a responsibility, then rescind it within two hours because "it's easier this way." Complain afterward about being overworked.

Module 6: The Cult of Confidentiality

Withholding information builds trust. (Said no one ever.)

Bad leaders treat information like state secrets. It doesn't matter if the topic is a mundane scheduling issue or an already-public announcement: everything is confidential.

The goal is to ensure that everyone feels perpetually out of the loop. Confusion is power. If your team doesn't understand what's going on, they can't challenge you. Or plan. Or sleep. Or — crucially — organize.

Learn to deploy euphemistic phrases such as:

- "I can't share details at this time."
- "We're still finalizing the process."
- "There are things happening behind the scenes."

This is your opportunity to turn the department into an escape room with no exits. True mastery lies in implying confidentiality without ever saying it. The raised eyebrow is your primary management tool.

Case study
You will examine a scenario in which a simple policy update becomes a three-week flurry of rumours, panic, and passive-aggressive emails because you refused to tell anyone anything.

Module 7: Meetings — The Infinite Frontier
If you can't fix a problem, form a committee

Bad leaders understand that meetings are not a tool but a lifestyle. The key is to schedule as many as possible, ideally with no agenda, outcomes, or time limits. If you can create a meeting about a meeting, you're a rising star.

In this module, you will learn how to:

- Call a meeting for something that could have been resolved with a one-sentence email.
- Fill an agenda with 14 items and then spend 45 minutes on item 1.
- Introduce a new discussion topic right as people start packing up.
- End with: "We'll revisit this next time," ensuring the existential continuity of the whole process.

If anyone asks why the meeting exists, say it's to "leverage synergies."

This is how institutions stagnate for years. Cherish the tradition. Honor your ancestors. Keep the flame of inefficiency alive.

Group exercise
Form a 12-person committee to decide whether to update the department website. None of the members have website access.

Module 8: Consultation as Avoidance Strategy
How to weaponize listening so nothing has to change

Your institution may claim to value consultation and participation. This is where you shine. You will take those values, stretch them out over months, and convert them into a perfect shield against action.

Learn to:

- Announce "broad consultations" that never end.
- Develop surveys so vague and contradictory that they yield no useful information.
- Produce multi-page reports destined to sit unread in shared folders.
- Request input, then discard it entirely.

And remember: no consultation process is complete until someone says, "We'll incorporate this into the next draft," even though no such draft exists.

The key is to appear deeply engaged and democratic while maintaining the status quo. Bonus points if you announce consultations during exam week, guaranteeing minimal participation and maximum plausible deniability.

Capstone exercise
Create a 30-page consultation summary recommending another consultation.

Module 9: Evidence-Based Leadership (But Make It Fiction)

Data is whatever you need it to be

Evidence-based decision-making is a foundational value in academia. As a bad leader, you will exploit this relentlessly.

Instruction includes:

- Citing "the data" without ever specifying to what data you're referring.
- Constructing spreadsheets so complex, multi-tabbed and violently colour-coded that no one dares question your conclusions.
- Selecting only the parts of a report that justify what you wanted to do in the first place.
- Claiming that contrary perspectives are "not data-driven."

You will also learn the noble administrative art of holding up a 19-tab Excel file in a meeting to intimidate the uninitiated.

Applied exercise

Defend a bad decision using a chart that has three axes and negative percentages. If your spreadsheet looks like modern art, you're doing it right. If people stop asking questions out of self-preservation, you have succeeded.

Module 10: The Inspirational Leadership Update

Closing session: confusing everyone into a state of passive acceptance

In your final evaluation, you will simulate a real academic scenario: Your department is exhausted. Morale is low. Nothing is moving. Everyone is begging for clarity. Your inbox is erupting like a small volcano, the kind that wipes out whole populations — mostly committees.

Your task? Deliver a cheerful "Leadership Update" that accomplishes the following:

- Announces several "strategic priorities" no one understands.
- References "synergies," "alignment," "ongoing consultations," and "transparent processes."
- Avoids giving any actual information.
- Is upbeat enough to make people doubt their own frustration.
- Creates so much ambiguity that the next meeting becomes inevitable.

Close with: "We hear you." Then immediately forget everything.

If colleagues leave the room more confused than when they entered, congratulations. If they also leave slightly concerned about your emotional stability, that's just a bonus.

You're now a certified bad leader.

Final words of non-wisdom

You may wonder why this workshop exists. Are there really leaders this dysfunctional? Are these behaviours truly so widespread? Could any of this possibly be real? If you've worked in academia for more than ten minutes, you already know the answer.

Bad leaders aren't born, they're made — usually through a combination of accidental appointment (no one else wanted the job), unclear expectations, and a spectacular lack of

accountability. They thrive in the grey zones of institutional life, in the cracks between policy and practice, in the endless twilight of committees and consultations and "ongoing processes."

They live among us. They run our meetings. They write our reports. They send the emails that haunt our dreams. (Often at 11:47 p.m., with the subject line "Quick Thought.") And every once in a while, they attend a professional development workshop that teaches them absolutely everything except leadership. Or humility. Or when to stop sending emails.

Welcome to the Institute. We hope you learned nothing — and that you implement it immediately.

20. The Quest for the Holy Principle

A fable of moral courage and other administrative hazards

Author's note

This chapter examines moral courage as an institutional ideal that is widely celebrated but unevenly supported in practice. While ethical principles are prominently invoked in mission statements, leadership discourse, and professional codes, acting on them within complex organisations often entails personal and professional risk. Through allegory and exaggeration, the chapter explores how institutional structures can simultaneously praise moral courage and render its exercise procedurally difficult, socially costly, or quietly discouraged.

. . .

In the dark ages of Academia, sometime around the present day, there arose a mighty institution known as the University of Camelot, home to the most valiant scholars, the most endless meetings, and the most elaborately useless flowcharts in the realm.

At its head sat **King Arthur,** Chair of the Senate and Guardian of the Strategic Plan (2020–2035, Extended Edition). Beside him sat his loyal knights:

- **Sir Lancelot the Overzealous**, ever ready to storm committees in the name of righteousness, and occasionally storm the wrong committees entirely.
- **Sir Robin the Risk-Averse**, who specialized in retreating bravely at the first sign of controversy.
- **Sir Galahad the Virtue Signaller**, renowned for his public statements of principle, though he was seldom available for follow-up.
- **Sir Gawain the Procedurally Pious**, who believed salvation lay in following every policy to the letter — and occasionally to the footnote.
- **The Wizard of HR**, a mysterious figure who spoke only in acronyms and could conjure a Respectful Workplace Initiative out of thin air.
- And, trailing them all, **Brother Bernard the Communications Officer**, who chronicled their deeds and ensured that no one said anything unapproved by Media Relations.

One fateful morning, as Arthur prepared to open yet another Senate meeting with his sacred gavel, the doors burst open and in strode the **Oracle of Ethics**, wearing a reflective vest and bearing a clipboard of destiny.

"O noble King," she intoned, "the realm is in peril. Integrity wanes, courage falters, and the Faculty of Business is considering another rebranding exercise. You must seek the *Holy Principle of Moral Courage*, for only it can restore virtue and slightly improve the workplace climate."

Arthur sighed deeply, for he had been hoping for a snow day. Still, being a man of duty, and having already promised to "lead with vision" in his annual evaluation, he accepted the quest, accompanied by his trusted knights.

Scene I: The Council of the Cowardly

The knights gathered in the Great Boardroom, a place where time itself stood still and coffee went cold in protest.

"Where shall we find this Holy Principle?" asked Sir Galahad. "Is it in a leadership manual?"

“Nay,” said Arthur. “For I have read them all. They contain only flowcharts and virtuous language.”

Sir Robin cleared his throat nervously. “Perhaps we could, ah, commission a working group to *consider* moral courage? With broad consultation? Say, within five to seven years?”

Arthur wondered if moral courage could survive that long. He fixed Sir Robin with a cold stare. “Enough dithering. This is not a time for cowardice. This is a time for action — even if it earns me another note in the Council’s silent ledger of ‘concerning behaviours’.” For once, Arthur chose principle over popularity, knowing the Council would brand him reckless.

The knights murmured in dismay; no one in recent memory had proposed action without first padding it in consultation.

And thus, reluctantly and with great trepidation, they mounted their metaphorical steeds (the university having cut funding for actual transportation) and set off in search of the Holy Principle.

Scene II: The Swamp of Compliance

Their first stop was the Swamp of Compliance, a treacherous region filled with policies, sub-policies, and guidance documents written in legalistic runes.

They slogged through waist-deep paperwork until they encountered the Dragon of Policy Review, a monstrous creature with seven heads, each demanding a different version of the same document.

“Who dares submit a new idea without prior approval?” hissed the dragon. “Have you completed the risk assessment?” Coughing loudly to clear a report jammed in its throat, it added: “And what of your individual conflict of interest declarations?”

“We seek only the Holy Principle of Moral Courage,” said Arthur, wondering when courage had become something one needed formal approval to request.

The dragon laughed. “Courage? You’ll need a waiver for that.”

Sir Lancelot, always the first into the fray, drew his sword and charged, swinging a mighty blow against the beast. His blade bounced harmlessly off the dragon’s Terms and Conditions, which proved as impervious to truth as they were to steel.

The Wizard of HR raised her wand. “Perhaps we could *collaboratively explore solutions* through a facilitated process of mutual understanding?”

A thick fog of consultation descended. When it cleared three hours later, they found themselves exactly where they’d started, but with an additional appendix. The dragon lay snoring loudly in the corner.

They retreated, bloodied in spirit but technically compliant — and still no further ahead in their quest.

Scene III: The Committee of Eternal Reflection

Their next stop was the Hall of Mirrors, home to the Committee of Eternal Reflection — a group of elders who had been discussing “the nature of ethical action” since the reign of Queen Accreditation.

“Dear honourable scholars,” began Arthur, “we, the Knights of the Round Table, are on a quest to find the Holy Principle of Moral Courage — do you have this principle within your remit? Should that not be the case, can you guide us to its whereabouts?”

“Brave knights,” replied the Chair of the Committee, stroking a beard that had tenure, “Before you act with moral courage, you must first ensure that all stakeholders feel *heard*.”

“And how long does that take?” asked Arthur, with a confused stare.

“Indefinitely,” replied the Chair. “We find the process itself very meaningful — action, less so.”

Sir Lancelot rolled his eyes. “Meaningful? You’ve been meeting for fifty years!”

“Yes,” said the Chair proudly. “Our next agenda item is the definition of ‘meaningful.’”

Arthur thanked them, promised to “circle back,” and fled with his knights before the Committee could assign them to a subcommittee with a multi-year work plan.

Scene IV: The Killer Rabbit of Reluctant Responsibility

Having escaped the Committee, the knights arrived at the entrance to the Cave of Policy Review, rumoured to contain ancient wisdom (and possibly an external evaluator). Guarding the cave was a small white rabbit.

“Behold,” said Brother Bernard, “the Rabbit of Reluctant Responsibility! It looks harmless enough.”

“Harmless?” cried the Wizard of HR. “That beast has slain more initiatives than any sabbatical review!”

Sir Gawain scoffed. “I’m not afraid of a little rabbit!” He advanced boldly, convinced that ethics should trump convenience — though tragically, he attempted to prove it through procedure rather than conviction. The rabbit leapt, teeth flashing, and decapitated his professional reputation in one bite.

“Sweet mercy!” cried Arthur. “It’s destroyed his career trajectory — and all he did was take responsibility!”

The rabbit turned its gaze upon them, its red eyes glowing with procedural fury.

“Run away, run away!” shouted Sir Robin, finally in his element.

The knights fled as the rabbit pursued, hurling evaluation forms and integrity checklists. Only when they reached the Bridge of Collegiality did it relent, pausing to file a grievance.

Interlude: The Holy Hand Grenade of Accountability

Breathless and terrified, the knights collapsed beside the bridge.

Arthur pounded the ground. “Enough! This creature mocks our integrity and our institutional courage — and I refuse to pretend otherwise. Brother Bernard, bring forth the Holy Hand Grenade of Accountability!” Arthur knew this act might cost him his chair, but silence felt like complicity.

Brother Bernard hesitated. “My Liege, are you certain? The Hand Grenade is a sacred relic of Transparency, to be used only in dire need and with prior approval from Legal.”

“Dire need?” Arthur thundered. “A rabbit has just annihilated our ethics champion!”

Brother Bernard produced a small, jewel-encrusted sphere with a sticker reading “Property of the Communications Department — Do not open without prior consultation.”

Arthur held it aloft. “Behold, the Holy Hand Grenade! With this, we shall cleanse the land of hypocrisy!”

Sir Robin stepped back. “Majesty, have you completed the Mandatory Risk Assessment for Symbolic Gestures of Accountability?”

Arthur ignored him. “How does one use it again?”

Brother Bernard consulted the Manual of Institutional Governance. “First, you shall pull the pin. Then you shall count to three. No more, no less. Three shall be the number thou shalt count, and the number of the counting shall be three. Four thou shalt not count, neither count thou two, excepting that thou then proceed to three. Five is right out.”

Arthur nodded solemnly and pulled the pin.

“One… two…”

“Wait!” cried the Wizard of HR. “Has anyone informed the Communications Department?”

“Three!” shouted Arthur, throwing the Holy Hand Grenade towards the killer rabbit.

There was a deafening *whoomp* and a blinding flash — catharsis mixed with the faint dread he might have just made things worse. When the smoke cleared, the rabbit was gone, but so too was the Faculty Lounge — and a promising early-career researcher’s funding envelope. The bridge, badly damaged, still stood, though barely.

Arthur stared at the smoking ruins. Moral courage without wisdom, he thought, was just another explosion — righteous intent turned into collateral damage.

Brother Bernard blinked through the dust. “Congratulations, Majesty. You have successfully demonstrated the risks of moral enthusiasm unaccompanied by due process.”

“Right,” Arthur coughed, “Perhaps next time we’ll try… dialogue.”

Scene V: The Bridge of Collegiality

A wizened old Dean stood guard at the shattered bridge. “To cross,” he rasped, “you must answer me these questions three!”

Arthur nodded wearily. “Proceed.”

“First: What is your name?”

“Arthur, Chair of the Senate.”

“Second: What is your quest?”

“To find the Holy Principle of Moral Courage.”

“Third: What is the acceptable level of dissent in a collegial environment?”

Arthur hesitated. “Uh… respectful disagreement within the bounds of institutional loyalty?” he ventured, aware that too much honesty could be grounds for being “invited to reflect.”

“Correct,” said the Dean. “You may pass.”

Sir Lancelot approached next.

“Name?”

“Lancelot, Champion of Integrity!”

“Quest?”

“To speak truth to power!”

“And what is the protocol for lodging a complaint against power?”

Lancelot blinked. “Er… there is one?”

The Dean smiled coldly. “Incorrect.” And with that, Lancelot was flung into the Abyss of Administrative Leave. His cries echoed faintly, promising a return after due process.

Scene VI: The Forest of Human Resources

Weary and diminished, the knights entered a vast forest. Posters hung from every tree: *Respect. Resilience. Renewal.* In the distance, they heard the faint hum of a mindfulness workshop.

A soft voice echoed: “Welcome, travelers. You have entered the Forest of HR.”

From behind a fern stepped the Wizard of HR, now fully transfigured into her true form — an omnipotent being surrounded by binders and scented candles.

“You seek moral courage,” she said gently. “But tell me: have you filled out the Self-Assessment of Readiness to be Courageous?”

Arthur groaned. “Must we always evaluate before acting?”

“It is the way of the institution,” she said. “Courage without a competency framework is chaos.”

Sir Robin brightened. “Could we, perhaps, form a Courage Working Group?”

The wizard smiled serenely. “You already have.”

Arthur sank to his knees. “Enough!” he cried. “I tire of endless process — courage cannot be competency-mapped forever. Show me the Holy Principle!” He risked violating protocol, a heresy in Camelot, but courage demanded more than compliance.

The wizard raised her wand. “Very well. But remember, once seen it cannot be un-seen.” A bright light filled the forest.

Scene VII: Revelation in the Break Room

When the light faded, Arthur found himself alone in the staff break room. A coffee machine sputtered weakly in the corner. On the noticeboard hung a single piece of paper: *“Doing what’s right, even when inconvenient, even when unseen.”*

Arthur stared. “That’s it? That’s the Holy Principle? Something so simple we keep burying it under frameworks?”

The Oracle of Ethics appeared beside him. “Indeed. Moral courage is no artifact, no relic. It’s the small, daily choice to act with integrity, even when there’s no applause — and occasionally when there’s active hostility.”

Arthur frowned. “That’s… inconveniently simple.”

“Yes,” said the Oracle. “Simplicity terrifies institutions. That’s why so few pursue it.”

Arthur realized this was harder than slaying dragons — because dragons don’t write performance reviews.

Scene VIII: Return to the Senate

Arthur returned to Camelot, weary but enlightened. His surviving knights gathered around.

“Well?” asked Sir Robin. “Did you find it?”

“I did,” said Arthur. “But it is not a thing one can hold. It is a practice. A habit. It requires neither sword nor title, but persistence — and the willingness to risk comfort, reputation, and the occasional committee appointment for the sake of one’s conscience.”

The knights exchanged uneasy glances.

Sir Galahad raised a hand. “Could we perhaps celebrate this insight with a symposium on ‘Performing Moral Courage in Times of Change’?”

Arthur sighed. “Fine. But no PowerPoints.”

Cheers erupted. Someone suggested forming a committee to draft the proceedings.

Arthur left them to it. Outside, dawn broke over the towers of Camelot. The Dragon of Policy Review still slept. The Rabbit of Reluctant Responsibility had been replaced by the equally deadly Stoat of Strategic Stagnation. Somewhere, deep in the university, a faint ticking was heard — Brother Bernard quietly rearming the Holy Hand Grenade, “just in case.”

And somewhere else, a few brave souls were quietly doing the right thing — without memos, without witnesses, without approval.

And that, Arthur thought, was courage enough.

Epilogue

Moral courage doesn’t always look heroic. Sometimes it looks like saying “no” to a bad decision when everyone else nods. Sometimes it’s defending a colleague or admitting your own mistake. Sometimes it’s silence, the kind that resists complicity, not the kind that avoids conflict.

The institutions we inhabit often confuse compliance with virtue. They reward silence dressed as collegiality, and punish dissent conveniently framed as disruption. But as the Knights of Camelot discovered, true courage isn’t about defeating dragons; it’s about refusing to become one — especially when the institution quietly rewards dragon-like behaviour.

And if along the way we must face the occasional killer rabbit — or a well-meaning but inept leader armed with a Holy Hand Grenade — so be it.

Better that than a lifetime of safe, comfortable cowardice dressed up as collegiality.

Afterward

Institutions rarely recognise themselves as absurd. From the inside, most procedures appear reasonable, most delays defensible, most compromises necessary. Each step has a rationale, each document a purpose, each committee a mandate. Absurdity emerges not from any single decision, but from accumulation — from the layering of safeguards, incentives, and risk-avoidance strategies that gradually displace judgment while preserving the appearance of responsibility.

This book has not argued that academic institutions are uniquely flawed, nor that bureaucracy is inherently misguided. Universities are complex organisations tasked with balancing competing values: autonomy and accountability, fairness and efficiency, openness and control. The mechanisms examined here — committees, policies, platforms, performance metrics, leadership scripts — exist for reasons that are often sound. The problem arises when those mechanisms become self-justifying, when process substitutes for deliberation and documentation for decision.

Satire and sarcasm have been used throughout this book not to ridicule individuals, but to slow things down long enough to make patterns visible. By exaggerating familiar forms and institutional voices, the chapters have sought to expose how responsibility is distributed, deferred, or absorbed into procedure. What appears ridiculous in isolation is often entirely ordinary in practice. Satire simply refuses to treat that ordinariness as neutral.

If there is a thread running through these pages, it is the tension between moral agency and institutional design. Universities speak fluently about values such as integrity, equity, trust, and courage, yet they frequently organise themselves in ways that make acting on those values difficult. Leadership is praised, but tightly constrained. Expertise is invoked, but selectively instrumentalised. Participation is encouraged, but unevenly recognised. None of this requires malice. It requires only systems that reward compliance more reliably than responsibility.

This book is not a call for heroism, nor an argument for dismantling institutional safeguards. It is a reminder that institutions are moral actors, not merely collections of policies and procedures — they have values, distinct cultures, and real responsibilities. Rules, platforms, and committees can support ethical action, but they cannot replace it indefinitely. At some point, someone must decide. When no one does, deliberation itself becomes a form of avoidance.

The committee will continue to meet. The forms will multiply. Updates will be issued, guidance clarified, language refined. Whether these activities enable judgment or merely perform it remains an open question — one that cannot be resolved by procedure alone.

This document is now complete.

About the Author

Official Version

Bryn Williams-Jones is Professor of Bioethics and Director of the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine in the School of Public Health at the Université de Montréal. His work focuses on the socio-ethical and policy implications of health innovations in diverse contexts, with particular attention to conflicts arising in academic research, governance, and professional practice. He is especially interested in developing ethical tools for navigating situations in which such conflicts cannot be fully resolved or avoided. He is Editor-in-Chief of the *Canadian Journal of Bioethics* and author of *Playing the Academic Game*. Through *BrynStorming*, his bilingual (English/French) writing practice, he reflects on bioethics, academic life, and institutional leadership.

Procedurally Approved Version

Bryn Williams-Jones holds a PhD and occupies several roles that require regular declarations of interest, careful phrasing, and sustained participation in meetings. He is Professor of Bioethics and Director of the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine at the Université de Montréal, where he works on ethical issues related to health innovation, academic governance, and situations in which conflicts are identified, managed, and documented. He has served in editorial and governance capacities, including as Editor-in-Chief of the *Canadian Journal of Bioethics*, and is the author of *Playing the Academic Game*. He maintains a bilingual writing practice on bioethics, leadership, and institutional life. Relevant affiliations, identifiers, and professional activities are available upon request, review, and confirmation of compliance.

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